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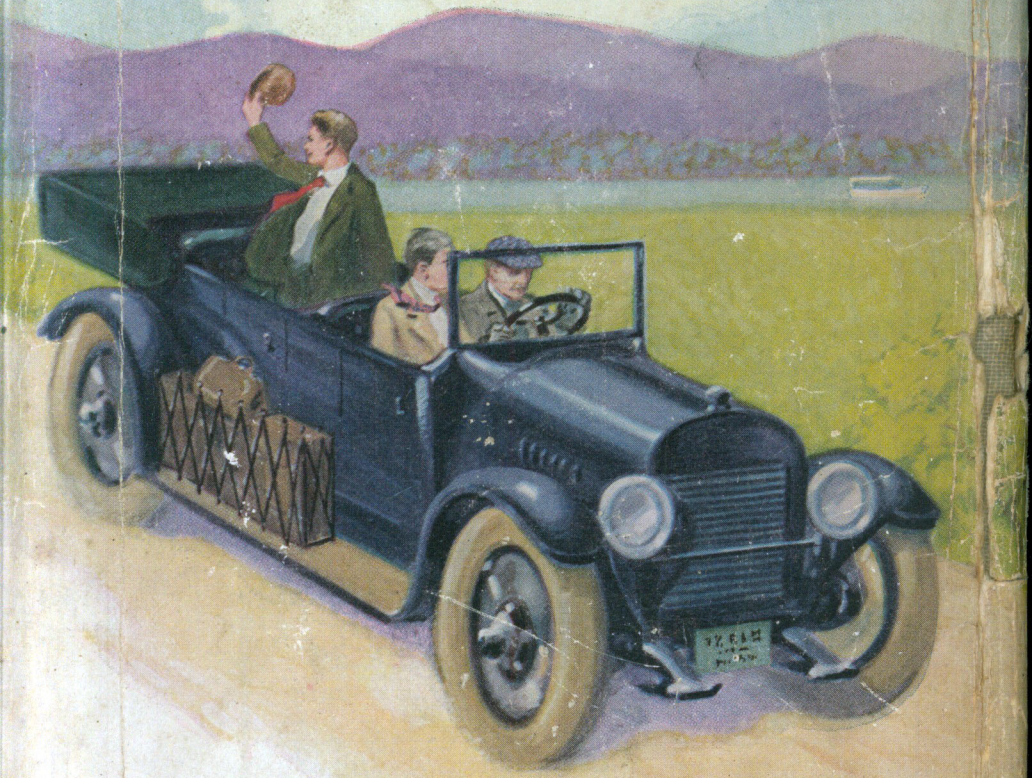

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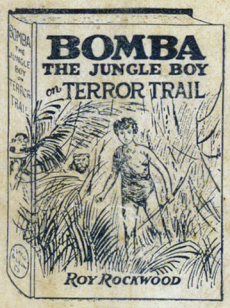

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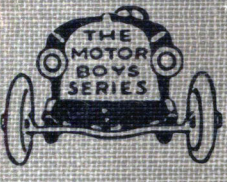

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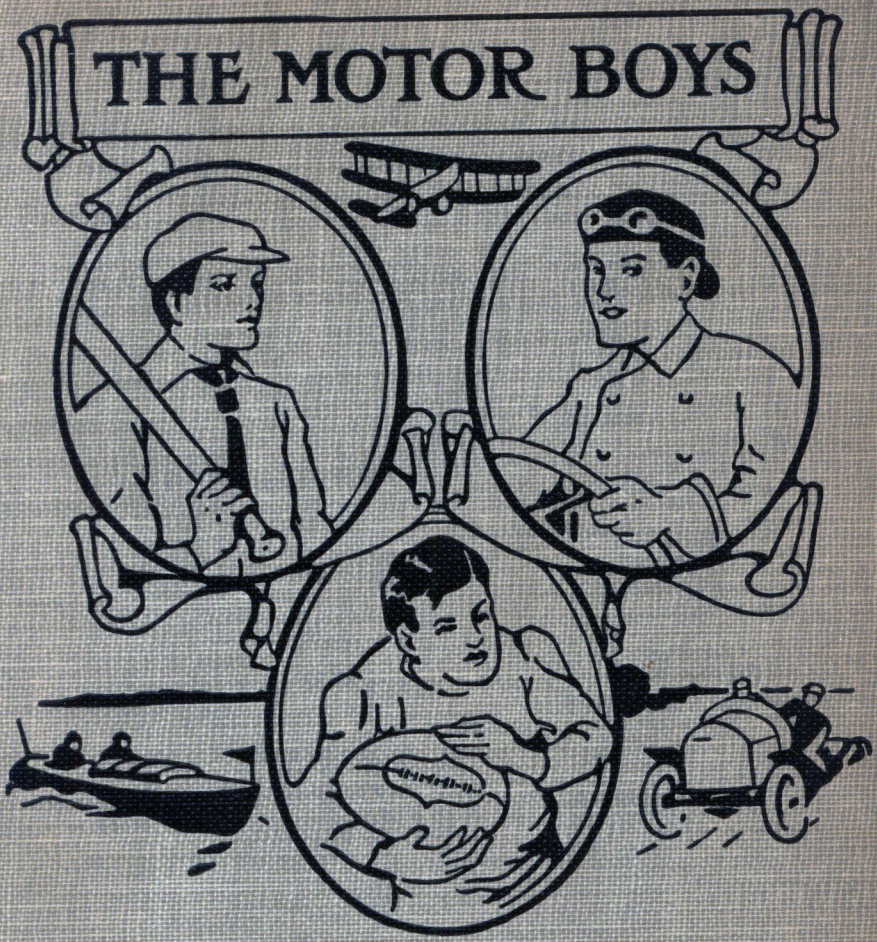

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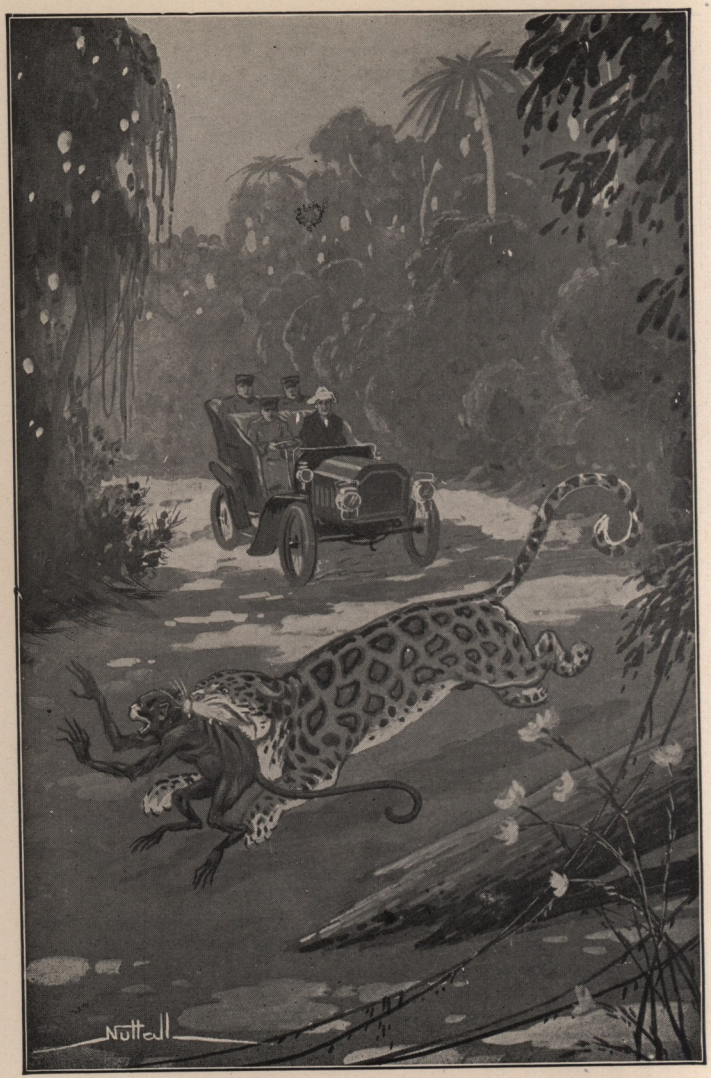

THE BIG BEAST HAD A MONKEY IN ITS MOUTH

The Motor Boys in Mexico *Page 128*

The Motor Boys in Mexico

OR

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By CLARENCE YOUNG

AUTHOR OF "THE MOTOR BOYS," "THE MOTOR BOYS OVERLAND," ETC.

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PREFACE.

Dear Boys:

At last I am able to give you the third volume of "The Motor Boys Series," a line of books relating the doings of several wide-awake lads on wheels, in and around their homes and in foreign lands.

The first volume of this series, called "The Motor Boys," told how Ned, Bob and Jerry became the proud possessors of motor-cycles, and won several races of importance, including one which gave to them, something that they desired with all their hearts, a big automobile touring car.

Having obtained the automobile, the lads were not content until they arranged for a long trip to the great West, as told in "The Motor Boys Overland." On the way they fell in with an old miner, who held the secret concerning the location of a lost gold mine, and it was for this mine that they headed, beating out some rivals who were also their bitter enemies.

While at the mine the boys, through a learned professor, learned of a buried city in Mexico, said to contain treasures of vast importance. Their curiosity was fired, and they arranged to go to

Mexico in their touring car, and the present volume tells how this trip was accomplished.

Being something of an automobile enthusiast myself, it has pleased me greatly to write this story, and I hope the boys will like "The Motor Boys in Mexico" fully as well as they appeared to enjoy "The Motor Boys" and "The Motor Boys Overland."

CLARENCE YOUNG.

May 28, 1906.

THE MOTOR BOYS IN MEXICO.

CHAPTER I.

THE PROFESSOR IN TROUBLE.

"BANG! Bang! Bang!"

It was the sound of a big revolver being fired rapidly.

"Hi, there! Who you shootin' at?" yelled a voice.

Miners ran from rude shacks and huts to see what the trouble was. Down the valley, in front of a log cabin, there was a cloud of smoke.

"Who's killed? What's the matter? Is it a fight?" were questions the men asked rapidly of each other. Down by the cabin whence the shots sounded, and where the white vapor was rolling away, a Chinaman was observed dancing about on one foot, holding the other in his hands.

"What is it?" asked a tall, bronzed youth, coming from his cabin near the shaft of a mine on top of a small hill. "Cowboys shooting the town up?"

"I guess it's only a case of a Chinaman fooling

with a gun, Jerry. Shall I run down and take a look?" asked a fat, jolly, good-natured-looking lad.

"Might as well, Chunky," said the other. "Then come back and tell Ned and me. My, but it's warm!"

The stout youth, whom his companion had called Chunky, in reference to his stoutness, hurried down toward the cabin, about which a number of the miners were gathering. In a little while he returned.

"That was it," he said. "Dan Beard's Chinese cook got hold of a revolver and wanted to see how it worked. He found out."

"Is he much hurt?" asked a third youth, who had joined the one addressed as Jerry, in the cabin door.

"One bullet hit his big toe, but he's more scared than injured. He yelled as if he was killed, Ned."

"Well, if that's all the excitement, I'm going in and finish the letter I was writing to the folks at home," remarked Jerry. The other lads entered the cabin with him, and soon all three were busy writing or reading notes, for one mail had come in and another was shortly to leave the mining camp.

It was a bright day, early in November, though the air was as hot as if it was mid-summer, for the valley, which contained the gold diggings, was located in the southern part of Arizona, and the sun fairly burned as it blazed down.

The three boys, who had gone back into their cabin when the excitement following the accidental shooting of the Chinaman had died away, were Jerry Hopkins, Bob Baker and Ned Slade. Bob was the son of Andrew Baker, a wealthy banker; Ned's father was a well-to-do merchant, and Jerry was the son of a widow, Julia Hopkins. All of the boys lived in Cresville, Mass., a town not far from Boston.

The three boys had been chums through thick and thin for as many years as they could remember. A strange combination of circumstances had brought them to Arizona, where, in company with Jim Nestor, an old western miner, they had discovered a rich gold mine that had been lost for many years.

"There, my letter's finished," announced Jerry, about half an hour after the incident of the shooting.

"I had mine done an hour ago," said Ned.

"Let's run into town in the auto and mail them. We need some supplies, anyhow," suggested Bob.

"All right," assented the others.

The three boys went to the shed where their touring car, a big, red machine in which they had come West, was stored. Ned cranked up, and with a rattle, rumble and bang of the exhaust, the car started off, carrying the three lads to Rockyford, a town about ten miles from the gold diggings.

"I wonder if we'll ever see Noddy Nixon or Jack Pender again?" asked Bob, when the auto had covered about three miles.

"And you might as well say Bill Berry and Tom Dalsett," put in Jerry. "They all got away together. I don't believe in looking on the dark side of things, but I'm afraid we'll have trouble yet with that quartette."

"They certainly got away in great shape," said Bob. "I'll give Noddy credit for that, if he is a mean bully."

Noddy Nixon was an old enemy of the three chums. As has been told in the story of "The Motor Boys," the first book of this series, Jerry, Ned and Bob, when at home in Massachusetts, had motor-cycles and used to go on long trips together, on several of which they met Noddy Nixon, Jack Pender and Bill Berry, a town ne'er-do-well, with no very pleasant results. The boys had been able to secure their motor-cycles through winning prizes at a bicycle race, in which Noddy was beaten. This made him more than ever an enemy of the Motor Boys.

The latter, after having many adventures on their small machines, entered a motor-cycle race. In this they were again successful, defeating some crack riders, and the prize this time was a big, red touring automobile, the same they were now using.

Once they had an auto they decided on a trip

across the continent, and their doings on that journey are recorded in the second book of this series, entitled "The Motor Boys Overland."

It was while out riding in their auto in Cresville one evening that they came across a wounded miner in a hut. He turned out to be Jim Nestor, who knew the secret of a lost mine in Arizona. While sick in the hut, Nestor was robbed of some gold he carried in a belt. Jack Pender was the thief, and got away, although the Motor Boys chased him.

With Nestor as a guide, the boys set out to find the lost mine. On the way they had many adventures with wild cowboys and stampeded cattle, while once the auto caught fire.

They made the acquaintance, on the prairies, of Professor Uriah Snodgrass, a collector of bugs, stones and all sorts of material for college museums, for he was a naturalist. They succeeded in rescuing the professor from a mob of cowboys, who, under the impression that the naturalist had stolen one of their horses, were about to hang him. The professor went with the boys and Nestor to the mine, and was still with them.

The gold claim was not easily won. Noddy Nixon, Pender, Berry and one Pud Stoneham, a gambler, aided by Tom Dalsett, who used to work for Nestor, attacked the Motor Boys and their friends and tried to get the mine away from them.

However, Jerry and his friends won out, the sheriff arrested Stoneham for several crimes committed, and the others fled in Noddy's auto, which he had stolen from his father, for Noddy had left home because it was discovered that he had robbed the Cresville iron mill of one thousand dollars, which crime Jerry and his two chums had discovered and fastened on the bully.

So it was no small wonder, after all the trouble Noddy and his gang had caused, that Jerry felt he and his friends might hear more of their unpleasant acquaintances. Noddy, Jerry knew, was not one to give up an object easily.

In due time town was reached, the letters were mailed, and the supplies purchased. Then the auto was headed back toward camp. About five miles from the gold diggings, Ned, who sat on the front seat with Bob, who was steering, called out:

"Hark! Don't you hear some one shouting?"

Bob shut off the power and, in the silence which ensued, the boys heard a faint call.

"Help! Help! Help!"

"It's over to the left," said Ned.

"No; it's to the right, up on top of that hill," announced Jerry.

They all listened intently, and it was evident that Jerry was correct. The cries could be heard a little more plainly now.

"Help! Hurry up and help!" called the voice. "I'm down in a hole!"

The boys jumped from the auto and ran to the top of the hill. At the summit they found an abandoned mine shaft. Leaning over this they heard groans issuing from it, and more cries for aid.

"Who's there?" asked Jerry.

"Professor Uriah Snodgrass, A. M., Ph.D., F. R. G. S., B. A. and A. B. H."

"Our old friend, the professor!" exclaimed Ned. "How did you ever get there?" he called down the shaft.

"Never mind how I got here, my dear young friend," expostulated the professor, "but please be so kind as to help me out. I came down a ladder, but the wood was rotten, and when I tried to climb out, the rungs broke. Have you a rope?"

"Run back to the machine and get one," said Jerry to Bob. "We'll have to pull him up, just as we did the day he fell over the cliff."

In a few minutes Bob came back with the rope. A noose was made in one end and this was lowered to the professor.

"Put it around your chest, under your arms, and we will haul you up," said Jerry.

"I can't!" cried the professor.

"Why not?"

"Can't use my hands."

"Are your arms broken?" asked the boy, afraid lest his friend had met with an injury.

"No, my dear young friend, my arms are not broken. I am not hurt at all."

"Then, why can't you put the rope under your arms?"

"Because I have a very rare specimen of a big, red lizard in one hand, and a strange kind of a bat in the other. They are both alive, and if I let them go to fix the rope they'll get away, and they're worth five hundred dollars each. I'd rather stay here all my life than lose these specimens."

"How will we ever get him up?" asked Bob.

CHAPTER II.

THE PROFESSOR'S STORY.

FOR a little while it did seem like a hard proposition. The professor could not, or rather would not, aid himself. Once the rope was around him it would be an easy matter for the boys to haul him out of the hole.

"If we could lasso him it would be the proper thing," said Bob.

"I have it!" exclaimed Ned.

He began pulling up the rope from where it dangled down into the abandoned shaft.

"What are you going to do?" asked Jerry.

"I'll show you," replied Ned, adjusting the rope around his chest, under his arms. "Now if you two will lower me into the hole I'll fasten this cable on the professor and you can haul him up. Then you can yank me out, and it will be killing two birds with one stone."

"More like hanging two people with one rope," laughed Bob.

But Ned's plan was voted a good one. Jerry and Bob lowered him carefully down the shaft,

until the slacking of the rope told that he was at the bottom. In a little while they heard a shout:

"Haul away!"

It was quite a pull for the two boys, for, though the professor was a small man, he was no lightweight. Hand over hand the cable was hauled until, at last, the shining bald head of the naturalist was observed emerging from the black hole of the abandoned mine.

"Easy, easy, boys!" he cautioned, as soon as his chin was above the surface. "I've got two rare specimens with me, and I don't want them harmed."

When Jerry and Bob had pulled Professor Snodgrass up as far as possible, by means of the rope, the naturalist rested his elbows on the edge of the shaft and wiggled the rest of the way out by his own efforts. In one hand was a big lizard, struggling to escape, and in the other was a large bat, flapping its uncanny wings.

"Ah, I have you safe, my beauties!" exclaimed the collector. "You can't get away from me now!" He placed the reptile and bat in his green specimen-box, which was on the ground a short distance away, his face beaming with pride over his achievement, though in queer contrast to his disordered appearance, for he had fallen in the mud of the mine, his clothes were all dirt, his hat was gone and he looked as ruffled as a wet hen.

"Much obliged to you, boys," he said, coming over to Bob and Jerry. "I might have stayed there forever if you hadn't come along. Seems as though I am always getting into trouble. Do you remember the day I fell over the cliff with Broswick and Nestor, and you pulled us up with the auto?"

"I would say we did," replied Jerry. "But now we must pull Ned up."

Once more the rope was lowered down the shaft and in a few minutes Ned was hauled up safely.

"It's almost as deep as our mine shaft," he said, as he brushed the dirt from his clothes, "but I didn't see any gold there, for it's as dark as a pocket. How did you come to go down, professor?"

"I suspected I might get some specimens in such a place," replied the naturalist, "so I just went down, and I had excellent luck, most excellent!"

"It's a good thing you think so," put in Jerry. "Most people would call it bad to get caught at the bottom of a mine shaft."

"Oh, it wasn't so bad," went on the professor, casting his eyes over the ground in search of any stray specimens of snakes or bugs. "I had my candle with me until I lost it, just after I caught the lizard and bat. I could have come up all right if the ladder hadn't broken. It was quite a hole, for a fact. It reminds me of another big hole I once heard about."

"What hole is that?" asked Ned.

"Oh, that's quite a story, all about mysteries, buried cities and all that."

"Tell us about it," suggested Jerry.

"To-night, maybe," answered the naturalist. "I want to get back to camp now and attend to my specimens."

The boys and the professor, the latter carrying his box of curiosities, were soon in the auto and speeding back to the gold mine.

That night, sitting around the camp-fire, which blazed cheerfully, the boys asked Professor Snodgrass to tell them the story he had hinted at when they hauled him from the mine shaft.

"Let me listen, too," said Jim Nestor, filling his pipe and stretching out on the grass.

Then, in the silence of the early night, broken only by the crackle of the flames and the distantly heard hoot of owls or howl of foxes, the naturalist told what he knew of a buried city of ancient Mexico.

"It was some years ago," he began, "that a friend of mine, a young college professor, was traveling in Mexico. He visited all the big places and then, getting tired of seeing the things that travelers usually see, he struck out into the wilds, accompanied only by an old Mexican guide.

"He traveled for nearly a week, getting farther and farther away from civilization, until one night

he found himself on a big level plain, at the extreme end of which there was a curiously shaped mountain.

"He proposed to his guide that they camp for the night and proceed to the mountain the next day. The guide assented, but he acted so queerly that my friend wondered what the matter was. He questioned his companion, but all he could get out of him was that the mountain was considered a sort of unlucky place, and no one went there who could avoid it.

"This made my friend all the more anxious to see what might be there, and he announced his intention of making the journey in the morning. He did so, but he had to go alone, for, during the night, his guide deserted him."

"And what did he find at the mountain?" asked Bob. "A gold mine?"

"Not exactly," replied the professor.

"Maybe it was a silver lode," suggested Nestor. "There's plenty of silver in Mexico."

"It wasn't a silver mine, either," went on the professor. "All he found was a big hole in the side of the mountain. He went inside and walked for nearly a mile, his only light being a candle. Then he came to a wall of rock. He was about to turn back, when he noticed an opening in the wall. It was high up, but he built a platform of stones up and peered through the opening."

"What did he see?" asked Jerry.

"The remains of an ancient, buried city," replied Professor Snodgrass. "The mountain was nothing more than a big mound of earth, with an opening in the top, through which daylight entered. The shaft through the side led to the edge of the city. My friend gazed in on the remains of a place thousands of years old. The buildings were mostly in ruins, but they showed they had once been of great size and beauty. There were wide streets with what had been fountains in them. There was not a vestige of a living creature. It was as if some pestilence had fallen on the place and the people had all left."

"Did he crawl through the hole in the wall and go into the deserted city?" asked Nestor, with keen interest.

"He wanted to," answered the naturalist, "but he thought it would be risky, alone as he was. So he made a rough map of as much of the place as he could see, including his route in traveling to the mountain. Then he retraced his steps, intending to organize a searching party of scientists and examine the buried city."

"Did he do it?" came from Bob, who was listening eagerly.

"No. Unfortunately, he was taken ill with a fever as soon as he got back to civilization, and he died shortly afterward."

"Too bad," murmured Jerry. "It would have been a great thing to have given to the world news of such a place in Mexico. It's all lost now."

"Not all," said the professor, in a queer voice.

"Why not? Didn't you say your friend died?"

"Yes; but before he expired he told me the story and gave me the map."

"Where is it?" asked Nestor, sitting up and dropping his pipe in his excitement.

"There!" exclaimed the professor, extending a piece of paper, which he had brought forth from his possessions.

Eagerly, they all bent forward to examine the map in the light of the camp-fire. The drawing was crude enough, and showed that the buried city lay to the east of the chain of Sierre Madre Mountains, and about five hundred miles to the north of the City of Mexico.

"There's the place," said the professor, pointing with his finger to the buried city. "How I wish I could go there! It has always been my desire to follow the footsteps of my unfortunate friend. Perhaps I might discover the buried city. I could investigate it, make discoveries and write a book about it. That would be the height of my ambition. But I'm afraid I'll never be able to do it."

For a few minutes there was silence about the

camp-fire, each one thinking of the mysterious city that was not so very many miles from them.

Suddenly Ned jumped to his feet and gave a yell.

"Whoop!" he cried. "I have it! It will be the very thing!"

CHAPTER III.

NEWS OF NODDY NIXON.

"WHAT's the matter? Bit by a kissin' bug?" asked Nestor, as Ned was capering about.

"Nope! I'm going to find that buried city," replied Ned.

"He's loony!" exclaimed the miner. "He's been sleepin' in the moonlight. That's a bad thing to do, Ned."

"I'm not crazy," spoke the boy. "I have a plan. If you don't want to listen to it, all right," and he started for the cabin.

"What is it, tell us, will you?" came from the professor, who was in earnest about everything.

"I just thought we might make a trip to Mexico in the automobile, and hunt for that lost city," said Ned. "We could easily make the trip. It would be fun, even if we didn't find the place, and the gold mine is now in good shape, so that we could leave, isn't it, Jim?"

"Oh, I can run the mine, all right," spoke Nestor. "If you boys want to go traipsin' off to Mexico, why, go ahead, as far as I'm concerned.

Better ask your folks first, though. I reckon you an' the professor could make the trip, easy enough, but I won't gamble on your finding the buried city, for I've heard such stories before, an' they don't very often come true."

"Dearly as I would like to make the trip in the automobile, and sure as I feel that we could do it, I think we had better sleep on the plan," said Professor Snodgrass. "If you are of the same mind in the morning we will consider it further."

"I'd like to go, first rate," came from Jerry.

"Same here," put in Bob.

That night each of the boys dreamed of walking about in some ancient towns, where the buildings were of gold and silver, set with diamonds, and where the tramp of soldiers' feet resounded on the paved courtyards of the palaces of the Montezumas.

"Waal," began Nestor, who was up early, making the coffee, when the boys turned out of their bunks, "air ye goin' to start for Mexico to-day, or wait till to-morrow?"

"Don't you think we could make the trip?" asked Jerry, seriously.

"Oh, you can make it, all right, but you'll have troubles. In the first place, Mexico ain't the United States, an' there's a queer lot of people, mostly bad, down there. You'll have to be on the watch all the while, but if you're careful I guess

you'll git along. But come on, now, help git breakfust."

Through the meal, though the boys talked little, it was evident they were thinking of nothing but the trip to Mexico.

"I'm going to write home now and find if I can go," said Ned.

Jerry and Bob said they would do the same, and soon three letters were ready to be sent.

After their usual round of duties at the mine, which consisted in making out reports, dealing out supplies, and checking up the loads of ore, the boys went to town in the auto to mail their letters. It was a pleasant day for the trip, and they made good time.

"It will be just fine if we can go," said Bob. "Think of it, we may find the buried city and discover the stores of gold hidden by the inhabitants."

"I guess all the gold the Mexicans ever had was gobbled up by the Spaniards," put in Jerry.

"But we may find a store of curios, relics and other things worth more than gold," added Ned. "If we take the professor with us that's what he would care about more than money. I do hope we can go."

"It's going to be harder to find than the lost gold mine was," said Jerry. "That map the professor has isn't much to go by."

"Oh, it will be fun hunting for the place," went

on Bob. "We may find the city before we know it."

In due time the boys reached town and mailed their letters. There was some excitement in the village over a robbery that had occurred, and the sheriff was organizing a posse to go in search of a band of horse thieves.

"Don't you want to go 'long?" asked the official of the boys, whom he knew from having aided them in the battle at the mine against Noddy Nixon and his friends some time before. "Come along in the choo-choo wagon. I'll swear you in as special deputies."

"No, thanks, just the same," Jerry said. "We are pretty busy up at the diggings and can't spare the time."

"Like to have you," went on the sheriff, genially. "You could make good time in the gasolene gig after those hoss thieves."

But the boys declined. They had been through enough excitement in securing the gold mine to last them for a while.

"We must stop at the store and get some bacon," said Ned. "Nestor told me as we were coming away. There's none at the camp."

Bidding the sheriff good-by, and waiting until he had ridden off at the head of his forces, the boys turned their auto toward the general store, located on the main street of Rockyford.

"Howdy, lads!" exclaimed the proprietor, as he came to the door to greet them. "What is it to-day, gasolene or cylinder oil?"

"Bacon," replied Jerry.

"Got some prime," the merchant said. "Best that ever come off a pig. How much do you want?"

"Twenty pounds will do this time," answered Jerry. "We may not be here long, and we don't want to stock up too heavily."

"You ain't thinkin' of goin' back East, are ye?" exclaimed the storekeeper.

"More likely to go South," put in Ned. "We were thinking of Mexico."

"You don't say so!" cried the vendor of bacon and other sundries. "Got another gold mine in sight down there?"

"No; but——" and then Ned subsided, at a warning punch in the side from Jerry, who was not anxious to have the half-formed plans made public.

"You was sayin'——" began the storekeeper, as if desirous of hearing more.

"Oh, we may take a little vacation trip down into Mexico," said Jerry, in a careless tone. "We've been working pretty hard and we need a rest. But nothing has been decided yet."

"Mexico must be quite a nice place," went on the merchant.

"What makes you think so?" asked Bob.

"I heard of another automobilin' party that went there not long ago."

"Who was it?" spoke Jerry.

"Some chap named Dixon or Pixon or Sixon, I forget exactly what it was."

"Was it Nixon?" asked Jerry.

"That's it! Noddy Nixon, I remember now. He had a chap with him named Perry or Ferry or Kerry or——"

"Bill Berry, maybe," suggested Bob.

"That was it! Berry. Queer what a poor memory I have for names. And there was another with him. Let's see, I have it; no, that wasn't it. Oh, yes, Hensett!"

"You mean Dalsett," put in Ned.

"That's it! Dalsett! And there was another named Jack Pender. There, I bet I've got that right."

"You have," said Jerry. "You say they went to Mexico?"

"You see, it was this way," the storekeeper went on. "It was about three weeks ago. They come up in a big automobile, like yours, an' bought a lot of stuff. I kind of hinted to find out where they was headed for, an' all the satisfaction I got was that that there Nixon feller says as how he guessed Mexico would be the best place for them, as the United States Government hadn't no control down there. Then one of the others says Mexico would

suit him. So I guess they went. Now, is there anything else I can let you have?"

"Thanks, this will be all," replied Jerry, paying for the bacon.

The boys waited until they were some distance on the road before they spoke about the news the storekeeper had told them.

"I wouldn't be a bit surprised if Noddy and his gang had gone to Mexico," said Ned. "That's the safest place for them, after what they did."

"I wish they weren't there, if we are to take a trip in that country," put in Bob.

"It's a big place, I guess they won't bother us," came from Jerry.

But he was soon to find that Mexico was not big enough to keep Noddy and his crowd from making much trouble and no little danger for him and his friends.

They arrived at camp early in the afternoon and told Nestor the news they had heard. He did not attach much importance to it, as he was busy over an order for new mining machinery.

There was plenty for the boys to do about camp, and soon they were so occupied that they almost forgot there was such a place as Mexico.

CHAPTER IV.

OVER THE RIO GRANDE.

A WEEK later, during which there had been busy days at the mining camp, the boys received answers to their letters. They came in the shape of telegrams, for the lads had asked their parents to wire instead of waiting to write. Each one received permission to make the trip into the land of the Montezumas.

"Hurrah!" yelled Bob, making an ineffectual attempt to turn a somersault, and coming down all in a heap.

"What's the matter?" asked Nestor, coming out of the cabin. "Wasp sting ye?"

"We can go to Mexico!" cried Ned, waving the telegram.

"Same thing," replied the miner. "Ye'll git bit by sand fleas, tarantulas, scorpions, centipedes, horse-flies an' rattlesnakes, down there. Better stay here."

"Is it as bad as that?" asked Bob.

"If it is I'll get the finest collection of bugs the college ever saw," put in Professor Snodgrass.

"Well, it may not be quite as bad, but it's bad

enough," qualified Nestor. "But don't let me discourage you. Go ahead, this is a free country."

So it was arranged. The boys decided they would start in three days, taking the professor with them.

"And we'll find that buried city if it's there," put in Ned.

The next few days were busy ones. At Nestor's suggestion each one of the boys had a stout money-belt made, in which they could carry their cash strapped about their waists. They were going into a wild country, the miner told them, where the rights of people were sometimes disregarded.

Then the auto was given a thorough overhauling, new tires were put on the rear wheels, and a good supply of ammunition was packed up. In addition, many supplies were loaded into the machine, and Professor Snodgrass got an enlarged box made for his specimens, as well as two new butterfly nets.

The boys invested in stout shoes and leggins, for they felt they might have to make some explorations in a wild country. A good camp cooking outfit was taken along, and many articles that Nestor said would be of service during the trip.

"Your best way to go," said the miner, "will be to scoot along back into New Mexico for a ways, then take over into Texas, and strike the Rio Grande below where the Conchas River flows into

it. This will save you a lot of mountain climbing an' give you a better place to cross the Rio Grande. At a place about ten miles below the Conchas there is a fine flat-boat ferriage. You can take the machine over on that."

The boys promised to follow this route. Final preparations were made, letters were written home, the auto was gone over for the tenth time by Jerry, and having received five hundred dollars each from Nestor, as their share in the mine receipts up to the time they left, they started off with a tooting of the auto horn.

"That's more money than I ever had at one time before," said Bob, patting his money-belt as he settled himself comfortably down in the rear seat of the car, beside Professor Snodgrass.

"Money is no good," said the naturalist.

"No good?"

"No; I'd rather catch a pink and blue striped sand flea, which is the rarest kind that exists, than have all the money in the world. If I can get one of them or even a purple muskrat, and find the buried city, that will be all I want on this earth."

"I certainly hope we find the buried city," spoke up Ned, who was listening to the conversation, "but I wouldn't care much for a purple muskrat."

"Well, every one to his taste," said the professor. "We may find both."

The journey, which was to prove a long one, full

of surprises and dangers, was now fairly begun. The auto hummed along the road, making fast time.

That night the adventurers spent in a little town in New Mexico. Their arrival created no little excitement, as it was the first time an auto had been in that section. Such a crowd of miners and cowboys surrounded the machine that Jerry, who was steering, had to shut off the power in a hurry to avoid running one man down.

"I thought maybe ye could jump th' critter over me jest like they do circus hosses," explained the one who had nearly been hit by the car. Jerry laughingly disclaimed any such powers of the machine.

Two days later found them in Texas, and, recalling Nestor's directions about crossing the Rio Grande, they kept on down the banks of that mighty river until they passed the junction where the Conchas flows in.

So far the trip had been without accident. The machine ran well and there was no trouble with the mechanism or the tires. Just at dusk, one night, they came to a small settlement on the Rio Grande. They rode through the town until they came to a sort of house-boat on the edge of the stream. A sign over the entrance bore the words:

FERRY HERE.

"This is the place we're looking for, I guess," said Jerry. He drove the machine up to the entrance and brought it to a stop. A dark-featured man, with a big scar down one side of his face, slouched to the door.

"Well?" he growled.

"We'd like to be ferried over to the other side," spoke Jerry.

"Come to-morrow," snarled the man. "We don't work after five o'clock."

"But we'd like very much to get over to-night," went on Jerry. "And if it's any extra trouble we'd be willing to pay for it."

"That's the way with you rich chaps that rides around in them horseless wagons," went on the ferrymaster. "Ye think a man has got to be at yer beck an' call all the while. I'll take ye over, but it'll cost ye ten dollars."

"We'll pay it," said Jerry, for he observed a crowd of rough men gathering, whose looks he did not like, and he thought he and his friends would be better off on the other side of the stream, on Mexican territory.

"Must be in a bunch of hurry," growled the man. "Ain't tryin' to git away from th' law, be ye?"

"Not that we know of," laughed Jerry.

"Looks mighty suspicious," snarled the man. "But, come on. Run yer shebang down on the

boat, an' go careful or you'll go through the bottom. The craft ain't built to carry locomotives."

Jerry steered the car down a slight incline onto a big flat boat, where it was blocked by chunks of wood so that it could not roll forward or backward.

By this time the ferrymaster and his crew had come down to the craft. They were all rather unpleasant-looking men, with bold, hard faces, and it was evident that each one of the five, who made up the force that rowed the boat across the stream, was heavily armed. They wore bowie-knives and carried two revolvers apiece.

But the sight of armed men was no new one to the boys since their experience in the mining camp, and they had come to know that the chap who made the biggest display of an arsenal was usually the one who was the biggest coward, seldom having use for a gun or a knife.

"All ready?" growled the ferryman.

"All ready," called Jerry. He and the other boys, with the professor, had alighted from the auto and stood beside it on the flat boat.

Pulling on the long sweeps, the men sent the boat out into the stream, which, at this point, was about a mile wide. Once beyond the shore the force of the current made itself felt, and it was no easy matter to keep the boat headed right.

Every now and then the ferryman would cast

anxious looks at the sky, and several times he urged the men to row faster.

"Do you think it is going to storm, my dear friend?" asked the professor, in a kindly and gentle voice.

"Think it, ye little bald-headed runt! I know it is!" exploded the man. "And if it ketches us out here there's goin' to be trouble."

The sky was blacking up with heavy clouds, and the wind began to blow with considerable force. The boat seemed to make little headway, though the men strained at the long oars.

"Row, ye lazy dogs!" exclaimed the pilot. "Do ye want to upset with this steam engine aboard? Row, if ye want to git ashore!"

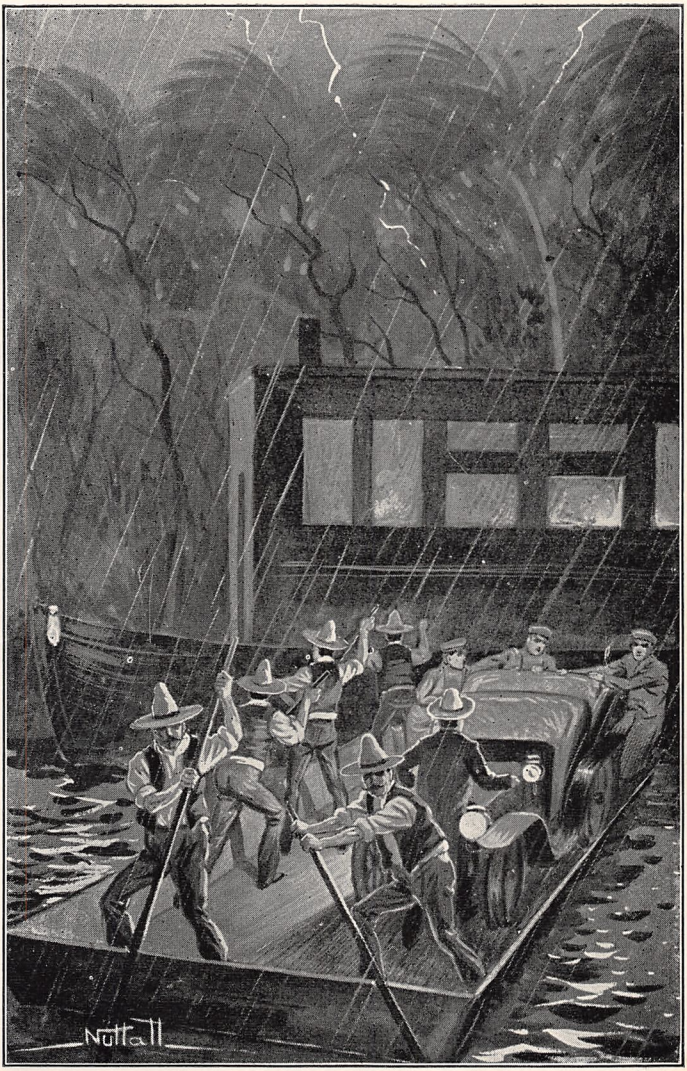
The men fairly bent the stout sweeps. The wind increased in violence, and quite high waves rocked the ferryboat. The sky was getting blacker. Jagged lightning came from the clouds, and the rumble of thunder could be heard.

"Row, I tell ye! Row!" yelled the pilot, but the men could do no more than they were doing. The big boat tossed and rocked, and the automobile started to slide forward.

"Fasten it with a rope!" cried Jerry, and aided by his companions they lashed the car fast.

"Look out! We're in for it now!" shouted the ferryman. "Here comes the storm!"

With a wild burst of sky artillery, the clouds



THE NEXT INSTANT THERE WAS A RESOUNDING CRASH.—*Page* 31.

opened amid a dazzling electrical display, and the rain came down in torrents. At the same time the wind increased to hurricane force, driving the boat before it like a cork on the waves.

Three of the men lost their oars, and the craft, with no steerage way, was tossed from side to side. Then, as there came a stronger blast of the gale, the boat was driven straight ahead.

"We're going to hit something!" yelled Jerry, peering through the mist of rain. "Hold fast, everybody!"

The next instant there was a resounding crash, and the sound of breaking and splintering wood.

CHAPTER V.

A THIEF IN THE NIGHT.

THE shock was so hard that every one on the ferryboat was knocked down, and the auto, breaking from the restraining ropes, ran forward and brought up against the shelving prow of the scow.

"Here, where you fellers goin'?" demanded a voice from amid the scene of wreckage and confusion. "What do ye mean by tryin' t' smash me all to splinters?"

At the same time this remonstrance was accompanied by several revolver shots. Then came a volley of language in choice Spanish, and the noise of several men chopping away at planks and boards.

The wind continued to blow and the rain to fall, while the lightning and thunder were worse than before. But the ferryboat no longer tossed and pitched on the storm-lashed river. It remained stationary.

"Now we're in for it," shouted the ferryman, as soon as he had scrambled to his feet. "A nice

kettle of fish I'm in for takin' this automobile over on my boat!"

"What has happened?" asked Jerry, trying to look through the mist of falling rain, and seeing nothing but a black object, as large as a house, looming up before him.

"Matter!" exclaimed the pilot. "We've gone and smashed plumb into Don Alvarzo's house-boat and done no end of damage. Wait until he makes you fellers pay for it."

"It wasn't our fault," began Jerry. "You were in charge of the ferryboat. We are only passengers. Besides, we couldn't stop the storm from coming up."

"Tell that to Don Alvarzo," sneered the ferryman. "Maybe he'll believe you. But here he comes himself, and we can see what has happened."

Several Mexicans bearing lanterns now approached. At their head was a tall, swarthy man, wearing a big cloak picturesquely draped over his shoulders, velvet trousers laced with silver, and a big sombrero.

By the lantern light it could be seen that the ferryboat had jammed head-on against the side of a large house-boat moored on the Mexican side of the Rio Grande. So hard had the scow rammed the other craft that the two were held together by a mass of splintered wood, the front of the ferryboat breaking a hole in the side of the house-boat

and sticking there. The automobile had nearly gone overboard.

Don Alvarzo began to speak quickly in Spanish, pointing to the damage done.

"I beg your pardon," said Jerry, taking off his cap and bowing in spite of the rain that was still coming down in torrents, "I beg your pardon, señor, but if you would be so kind as to speak in English we could understand it better."

"Certainly, my dear young sir," replied Don Alvarzo, bowing in his turn, determined not to be outdone by an *Americano*. "I speak English also. But what is this? *Diablo!* I am taking my meal on my house-boat. I smoke my cigarette, and am thankful that I am not out in the storm. Presto! There comes a crash like unto that the end of the world is nigh! I rise! I run! I fire my revolver, thinking it may be robbers! My *Americano* manager he calls out! Now, if you please, what is it all about?"

"The storm got the best of the ferryboat," said Jerry. "My friends and myself, including Professor Uriah Snodgrass, of whom you may have heard, for he is a great scientist——"

"I salute the professor," interrupted Don Alvarzo, bowing to the naturalist.

"Well, we are going to make a trip through Mexico," went on Jerry. "We engaged this man," pointing to the ferrymaster, "to take us over the

river in his boat. Unfortunately we crashed into yours. It was not our fault."

Angry cries from the Mexicans who stood in a half circle about Don Alvarzo on the deck of the house-boat showed that they understood this talk, but did not approve of it.

"*Americanos* pigs! Make pay!" called out one man.

"We're not pigs, and if this accident is our fault we will pay at once," said Jerry, hotly.

"There, there, señor," said the Don, motioning to his man to be quiet. "We will consider this. It appears that you are merely passengers on the ferryboat. The craft was in charge of Señor Jenkins, there, whom I very well know. He will pay me for the damage, I am sure."

"You never made a bigger mistake in your life!" exclaimed Jenkins. "If there's any payin' to be done, these here automobile fellers will have to do it. I'm out of pocket now with chargin' 'em only ten dollars, for three of my oars are lost."

"Very well, then, we will let the law take it's course," said the Don. "Here!" he called to his men, "take the ferry captain into custody. We'll see who is to pay."

"Rather than have trouble and delay we would be willing to settle for the damages," spoke up Jerry. "How much is it?"

"I will have to refer you to Señor Jones, my manager," said the Mexican.

"What's all the row about?" interrupted a voice, and a tall, lanky man came forward into the circle of lantern light. "People can't expect to smash boats an' not pay for 'em."

"We are perfectly willing to pay," said Jerry.

"Well, if there ain't my old friend Professor Snodgrass!" cried Jones, jumping down on the flat-boat and shaking hands with the naturalist. "Well, well, this is a sight for sore eyes. I ain't seen ye since I was janitor in your laboratory in Wellville College. How are ye?"

The professor, surprised to meet an acquaintance under such strange circumstances, managed to say that he was in good health.

"Well, well," went on Jones, "I'll soon settle this. Look here, Don Alvarzo," he went on, "these is friends of mine. If there's any damage——"

"Oh, I assure you, not a penny, not a penny!" exclaimed the Mexican. "I regret that my boat was in their way. I beg a thousand pardons. Say not a word more, my dear professor and young friends, but come aboard and partake of such poor hospitality as Don Miguel Fernandez Alvarzo can offer. I am your most humble servant."

The boys and the professor were glad enough of the turn events had taken. At a few quick orders from Jones and the Don, the Mexicans and

the ferry captain's crew backed the scow away from the house-boat. A landing on shore was made, the automobile run off, and the ferryman having been paid his money, with something extra for the lost oars, pulled off into the rain and darkness, growling the while.

"Now you must come in out of the rain," said Don Alvarzo, as soon as the auto had been covered with a tarpaulin, carried in case of bad weather. "We can dry and feed you, at all events."

It was a pleasant change from the storm outside to the warm and well-lighted house-boat. The thunder and lightning had ceased, but the rain kept up and the wind howled unpleasantly.

"I regret that your advent into this wonderful land of Mexico should be fraught with such inauspicious a beginning as this outburst of the elements," spoke Don Alvarzo, with a bow, as he ushered his guests into the dining-room.

"Oh, well, we're used to bad weather," said Bob, cheerfully.

In a little while the travelers had divested themselves of their wet garments and donned dry ones from their valises that had been brought in from the auto. Soon they sat down to a bountiful meal in which red peppers, garlic and frijoles, with eggs and chicken, formed a prominent part. Jones, the Don's manager, ate with them, and told how, in

his younger days, he had worked at a college where Professor Snodgrass had been an instructor.

Supper over, they all gathered about a comfortable fire and, in answer to questions from Don Alvarzo, the boys told something of their plans, not, however, revealing their real object.

"I presume you are searching for silver mines," said the Don, with a laugh and a sly wink. "Believe me, all the silver and gold, too, is taken out of my unfortunate country. You had much better go to raising cattle. Now, I have several nice ranches I could sell you. What do you say? Shall we talk business?"

But Jerry, assuming the rôle of spokesman, decided they had no inclination to embark in business just yet. They might consider it later, he said.

The Don looked disappointed, but did not press the point. The evening was passed pleasantly enough, and about nine o'clock, as the travelers showed signs of fatigue, Jones suggested that beds might be agreeable.

"I am sorry I cannot give you sleeping apartments together," remarked the Don. "I can put two of you boys in one room, give the professor another small room, and the third boy still another. It is the best arrangement I can make."

"That will suit us," replied Jerry. "Ned and I will bunk together."

"Very well; if you will follow my man he will

escort you to your rooms," went on the Mexican. "Perhaps the professor will sit up and smoke."

The naturalist said he never smoked, and, besides, he was so tired that bed was the best place for him. So he followed the boys, and soon the travelers were lighted to their several apartments. Ned and Jerry found themselves together, the professor had a room at one end of a long gangway and Bob an apartment at the other end. Good-nights were called, and the adventurers prepared to get whatever rest they might.

As Ned and Jerry were getting undressed they heard a low knock on their door.

"Who's there?" asked Jerry.

"Hush! Not so loud!" came in cautious tones. "This is Jones. Keep your guns handy, that's all. I can't tell you any more," and then the boys heard him moving away.

"Well, I must say that's calculated to induce sleep," remarked Ned. "Keep your guns handy! I wonder if we've fallen into a robber's den?"

"I don't like the looks of things," commented Jerry. "The Don may be all right, and probably is, but he has a lot of ugly-looking Mexicans on his boat. I guess we'll watch out. I hope Jones will warn the others."

There came a second knock on the door.

"What is it?" called Jerry, in a whisper.

"I've warned your friends," replied Jones. "Now watch out. I can't say any more."

His footsteps died away down the gangway. Jerry and Ned looked at each other.

"I guess we'll sit up the rest of the night," said Ned.

They started their vigil. But they were very tired and soon, before either of them knew it, they were nodding. Several times they roused themselves, but nature at length gained the mastery and soon they were both stretched out asleep on the bed.

About three o'clock in the morning there came a cautious trying of the door of the room where Ned and Jerry were sleeping. Soft footsteps sounded outside. If ever the boys needed to be awake it was now, for there was a thief in the night stealing in upon them.

CHAPTER VI.

INTO THE WILDERNESS.

JERRY had a curious dream. He thought he was back in Cresville and was playing a game of ball. He had reached second base safely and was standing there when the player on the other side grabbed him by his belt and began to pull him away.

"Here! Stop that! It's not in the game!" exclaimed Jerry, struggling to get away. So real was the effort that he awakened. He looked up, and there, standing over him in the darkness, was a dim form.

"Silence!" hissed a voice. "One move and I'll kill you. Remain quiet and you shall not be harmed!"

Jerry had sense enough to obey. He was wide awake now and knew that he was at the mercy of a Mexican robber. The man was struggling to undo the lad's money-belt about his waist, and it was this that had caused the boy's vivid dream.

Jerry had been kicking his feet about rather freely, but now he stretched out and submitted to the mauling to which the robber was subjecting

him. If only Ned would awake, Jerry thought, for Ned, he knew, had his revolver ready in his hand.

With a yank the thief took off Jerry's belt containing the money.

"Lie still or you die!" the fellow exclaimed.

Then he moved over to where Ned reclined on the bed. Jerry could see more plainly now, for the storm had ceased, the moon had risen and a stray beam came in the side window of the house-boat. The robber stretched out his hand to Ned's waist. He was about to reach under the coat and unbuckle the money-belt, when Ned suddenly sat upright. In his hand he held his revolver, which he pointed full in the face of the marauder.

"Drop that knife!" exclaimed Ned, for the Mexican held a sharp blade in his hand.

"Bah!" the fellow exclaimed, but the steel fell with a clang to the floor.

"Now lay the money-belt on the bed, if you don't want me to shoot!" said the boy, pushing the cold steel of the weapon against the Mexican's face.

"Pardon, señor, it was all a joke! Don't shoot!" the fellow uttered, in a trembling voice, at the same time tossing the belt over to Jerry, who had drawn his own revolver from under the pillow where he had placed it.

"Light the candle, Jerry," went on Ned, "while I keep him covered with the gun. We'll see what sort of a chap he is."

Jerry rose to find matches. But the robber did not wait for this. With a bound he leaped to the window. One jump took him through, and a second later a splash in the river outside told how he had escaped.

Ned ran to the casement and fired two shots, not with any intention of hitting the man, but to arouse his friends. In an instant there was confused shouting, lights gleamed in several rooms, and Don Alvarzo came hurrying in.

"What's the matter? What is it all about? Is any one killed?" he cried.

"Nothing much has happened," said Ned, as coolly as possible under the circumstances. "A burglar got in the room and got out again."

"A burglar? A thief? Impossible! In my house-boat? Where did he go? Did he get anything?"

"He got Jerry's money-belt," said Ned, "but——"

"A money-belt! Santa Maria! Was there much in it?" and Ned thought he saw a gleam come into the Don's eyes.

"Oh, he didn't get it to keep!" went on Jerry. "We both fell asleep, and the fellow robbed Jerry first. I was awakened by feeling Jerry accidentally kick me. I saw the robber take his belt, but when he came for mine I was ready for him. I made him give Jerry's back——"

"Made him give it back!" exclaimed Don Alvarzo, and Ned fancied he detected disappointment in his host's face. "You are a brave lad. Where did the fiend go?"

"Out of the window," answered Ned. "I fired at him to give him a scare."

"I am disgraced that such a thing should happen in my house!" exclaimed the Don, and this time it was Jerry who noticed Jones, the American manager, winking one eye as he stood behind his employer. "I am disgraced," went on the Mexican. "But never mind, I shall inform the authorities and they will hang every robber they catch to please me."

"I'm robbed! I'm robbed!" exclaimed Professor Snodgrass, bursting into the room. He was attired in blue pajamas, and his bald head was shining in the candle light.

"What did they get from you?" asked the Don, his face once more showing interest.

"The rascals took three fine specimens of sand fleas from me!" exclaimed the naturalist. "The loss is irreparable!"

"Diablo!" exclaimed the Don, under his breath. "Three sand fleas! Ah, these crazy *Americanos!*"

"I fancy you can get more, Professor," said Jones, with a laugh. "Well, there seems to be no great damage done. I reckon we can all go back to bed now."

The servants, who had been aroused by the commotion, went back to their rooms. In a little while the Don, with many and profuse apologies, withdrew, and the professor and Bob returned to their apartments. Jones was the last to go.

"I told you to be on the watch," he whispered, as he prepared to leave. "I overheard some of the rascals making up a game to relieve you of some of your cash. I wouldn't say the Don was in on it, but the sooner you get out of this place the better. You can go to sleep now. There is no more danger. Lucky one of you happened to wake up in time or you'd have been cleaned out. Good-night."

"Good-night," said Ned and Jerry, as they locked their door, which had been opened by false keys. They went to bed and slept soundly until daybreak, in spite of the excitement. Nor were they disturbed again.

Don Alvarzo talked of nothing but the attempted robbery the next morning at breakfast. He declared he had sent one of his men post-haste to inform the authorities, who, he said, would dispatch a troop of soldiers to search for the miscreant.

"I am covered with confusion that my guests should be so insulted," he said.

But, somehow, his voice did not ring true. The

boys and the professor, however, thanked him for his consideration and hospitality.

"I think we must be traveling now," announced Jerry.

"Will you not pass another night under my roof?" asked the Don. "I promise you that you will not be awakened by robbers again."

"No, thank you," said Jerry. Afterward, he said the Don might carry out his promise too literally, and take means to prevent them from waking if thieves did enter their rooms. So, amid protestations that he was disappointed at the shortness of their stay, and begging them to come and see him again, the Don said farewell.

"I think, perhaps, we ought to pay for the damage to your boat," said Jerry, not wishing to be under any obligations to the Mexican.

"Do not insult me, I beg of you!" exclaimed the Don, and he really seemed so hurt that Jerry did not press it. Then, with a toot of the horn, the auto started off on the trip through Mexico.

It was a beautiful day, and the boys were enchanted with the scenery. Behind them lay the broad Rio Grande, while off to the right were the foothills that increased in height and size until they became the mighty mountains. The foliage was deep green from the recent shower, and the sun shone, making the whole country appear a most delightful place.

"It looked as if our entrance into Mexico was not going to be very pleasant," said Jerry, "especially during the storm and the smash-up with the house-boat. But to-day it couldn't be better."

"That was a close call you and Ned had," put in Bob. "I wonder why they didn't tackle me?"

"Because you are so good-natured-looking the robbers knew you never had any money," replied Jerry, with a laugh. "I wonder what Chunky would have done if a Mexican brigand had demanded his money-belt?"

"He could have had it without me making a fuss," replied the stout youth. "Money is a good thing, but I think more of myself than half a dozen money-belts."

"Ah, my poor fleas!" exclaimed the professor. "I wonder if the robber killed them."

"I guess they hopped away," suggested Ned.

"No, they would never leave me," went on the naturalist.

"Well, I'm glad I haven't such an intimate acquaintance with them as that," commented Jerry, with a laugh.

"Oh, they were tame. They never bit me once," the professor said, with pride in his voice.

With Ned at the steering-wheel, the auto made good time. The road was a fair one, skirting the edge of a vast plain for several miles. About noon the path led into a dense forest, where there was

barely room for the machine to pass the thick trees and vines that bordered the way on either side.

"I hope we don't get caught in this wilderness," said Ned, making a skilful turn to avoid a fallen tree.

"Supposing we stop now and get dinner," suggested Jerry. "It's past noon, and I'm hungry."

The plan was voted a good one. The portable stove that burned gasolene was set going, coffee was made and some canned chicken was warmed in a frying pan. With some seasoning and frijoles Don Alvarzo had given them the boys made an excellent meal.

After a rest beneath the trees the boys started off in their auto again. The road widened when they had gone a few miles, and improved so that traveling was easier. About dusk they came to a small village, in the centre of which was a comfortable-looking inn.

"How will that do to stop at overnight?" asked Ned.

"First rate," answered Jerry.

The auto was steered into the yard, and the proprietor of the place came out, bowing and smiling.

"Your friends have just preceded you, señors," he said.

"Our friends?" asked Jerry, in surprise.

"*Si, señor.* Don Nixon and Don Pender. They were here not above an hour ago. I think they must be your friends, because they were in the same sort of an engine as yourselves."

"Noddy Nixon here!" exclaimed Jerry.

CHAPTER VII.

A FIERCE FIGHT.

THE boys glanced at each other in blank astonishment. As for Professor Snodgrass, he was too occupied with chasing a little yellow tree-toad to pay much attention to anything but the pursuit of specimens.

"We seem bound to cross the trail of Noddy sooner or later," remarked Ned. "Well, if he's ahead of us he can't be behind, that's one consolation."

"Will the honorable señors be pleased to enter my poor inn?" spoke the Mexican, bowing low.

"I suppose we may as well stop here," said Jerry, in a low tone to his companions. "It looks like a decent place, and it will give Noddy a chance to get a good way ahead, which is what we want. But I don't see what he means by going on when it will soon be night."

The auto was run under a shed, its appearance causing some fright among the servants and a few travelers, who began to mutter their prayers in Spanish. The boys, escorted by the Mexican, then

entered the hostelry. It was a small but decent-looking place, as Jerry had said. The boys were shown to rooms where, washing off some of the grime of their journey, they felt better.

"Supper is ready," announced the innkeeper, who spoke fairly good English.

"Where is the professor?" asked Ned, as the boys descended to the dining-room.

"The last I saw of him he was climbing up the tree after that toad," answered Bob. "But here he comes now."

The naturalist came hurrying into the room, clasping something in his hand.

"I've got it! I've got it!" he shouted. "A perfect beauty!"

The professor opened his fingers slightly to peer at his prize, when the toad, taking advantage of the opportunity, hopped on the floor and was rapidly escaping.

"Oh, oh, he's got away!" the professor exclaimed. "Help me catch him, everybody! He's worth a thousand dollars!"

The naturalist got down on his hands and knees and began crawling after the hopping tree-toad, while the boys could not restrain their laughter. A crowd of servants gathered in the doorway to watch the antics of the strange *Americano*.

"There! I have you again, my beauty!" cried the professor, pouncing on his specimen in a corner

of the room. "You shall not escape again!" and with that he popped the toad into a small specimen box which he always wore strapped on his back.

"Tell me," began the innkeeper, in a low tone, sidling up to Jerry, "is your elderly friend, the bald-headed señor, is he—ah—um—is he a little, what you *Americanos* call—er—wheels?" and he moved his finger with a circular motion in front of his forehead.

"Not in the least," replied the boy. "He is only collecting specimens for his college."

The Mexican shrugged his shoulders and spread out his hands in an apologetic sort of way, but it was easy to see that he believed Professor Snodgrass insane, an idea that was shared by all the servants in the inn, for not one of them, during the adventurers' brief stay in the hotel, would approach him without muttering a prayer.

"I wonder what we'll have to eat?" asked Ned, as with the others he prepared to sit down.

The innkeeper clapped his hands, which signal served in lieu of a bell for the servants. In a little while a meal of fish, eggs, chocolate and chicken, with the ever-present frijoles and tortillas, was served. It tasted good to the hungry lads, though as Jerry remarked he would have preferred it just as much if there hadn't been so much red pepper and garlic in everything.

"Water! Water! Quick!" cried Bob, after

taking a generous mouthful of frijoles, which contained an extra amount of red pepper. "My mouth is on fire!"

He swallowed a tumblerful of liquid before he had eased the smart caused by the fiery condiment. Thereafter he was careful to taste each dish with a little nibble before he indulged too freely.

In spite of these drawbacks, the boys enjoyed their experience, and were interested in the novelty of everything they saw.

"I wonder how we are to sleep?" said Jerry, after the meal was over. "I've heard that Mexican beds were none of the best."

"You shall sleep the sleep of the just, señors," broke in the Mexican hotel keeper, coming up just as Jerry spoke. "My inn is full, every room is occupied, but you shall sleep *en el sereno.*"

"Well, as long as it's on a good bed in a room where the mosquitoes can't get in I shan't mind that," spoke Bob. "I don't know as I care much for scenery, but if it goes with the bed, why, all right."

"You'll sleep in no room to-night," said Professor Snodgrass, who for the moment was not busy hunting specimens. "By *'en el sereno'* our friend means that you must sleep out of doors, under the stars. It is often done in this country. They put the beds out in the courtyard or garden and throw a mosquito net over them."

"That's good enough," said Bob. "It won't be the first time we've slept in the open. Bring on the *'en el sereno,'* " and he laughed, the innkeeper joining in.

The beds for the travelers were soon made up. They consisted of light cots of wood, with a few blankets on them. Placed out in the courtyard, under the trees, with the sky for a roof, the sleeping-places were indeed in the open.

But the boys and Professor Snodgrass had no fault to find. They had partaken of a good meal, they were tired with their day's journey, and about nine o'clock voted to turn in.

"We'll keep our revolvers handy this time," said Bob, "though I guess we won't need 'em."

"Can't be too sure," was Ned's opinion, as he took off his shoes and placed his weapon under his pillow.

It was not long before snores told that the travelers were sound asleep. For several hours the inn bustled with life, for the Mexicans did not seem to care much about rest. At length the place became quiet, and at midnight there was not a sound to be heard, save the noises of the forest, which was no great distance away, and the vibrations caused by the breathing of the slumberers.

It was about two o'clock in the morning when Bob was suddenly awakened by feeling a hand passed lightly over his face.

"Here!" he cried. "Get out of that!"

"Silence!" hissed a voice in his ear. But Bob was too frightened to keep quiet. He gave a wild yell and tried to struggle to his feet. Some one thrust him back on the cot, and rough hands tried to rip off his money-belt. The boy fought fiercely, and struck out with both fists.

"Wake up, Jerry and Ned!" he yelled. "We're being robbed. Shoot 'em!"

The courtyard became a scene of wild commotion. It was dark, for the moon was covered with clouds, but as Jerry and Ned sat up, alarmed by Bob's voice, they could detect dim forms moving about among the trees.

"The Mexicans are robbing us!" shouted Ned. He drew his revolver and fired in the air for fear of hitting one of his comrades. By the light of the weapon's flash he saw a man close to him. Bob aimed the pistol in the fellow's face and pulled the trigger. There was a report, followed by a loud yell. At the same time a thousand stars seemed to dance before Ned's eyes, and he fell back, knocked unconscious by a hard blow.

Jerry had sprung to his feet, to be met by a blow in the face from a brawny fist. He quickly recovered himself, however, and grappled with his assailant. He found he was but an infant in the hands of a strong man. The boy tried to reach for his revolver, but just as his hand touched the

butt of the weapon he received a stinging blow on the head and he toppled over backward, his senses leaving him.

In the meanwhile Bob was still struggling with the robber who had attacked him. Fleshy as he was, Bob had considerable strength, and he wrestled with the fellow. They both fell to the ground and rolled over. In their struggles they got underneath one of the beds.

"Let me go!" yelled Bob. At that instant he felt the ear of his enemy come against his mouth. The boy promptly seized the member in his teeth and bit it hard enough to make the fellow howl for mercy.

Bob suddenly found himself released, and the robber, with a parting blow that made the boy's head sing, rolled away from under the bed and took to his heels.

"Help! help! help!" cried Professor Snodgrass, as Bob tried to sit upright, for it was under the bed of the naturalist that the boy had rolled. In straightening up he had tipped the scientist, who, up to this point, had been sleeping soundly on the cot.

"What is it? What has happened? Is it a fire? Has an earthquake occurred? Is the river rising? Has a tidal wave come in? Santa Maria! But what is all the noise about?" cried the landlord, rushing into the courtyard, bearing an ancient

lantern. "What has happened, señors? Was your rest disturbed?"

"Was our rest disturbed?" inquired Bob, in as sarcastic a tone as possible under the circumstances. "Well, I would say yes! A band of robbers attacked us."

"A band of robbers! Santa Maria! Impossible! There are no robbers in Mexico!" and the innkeeper began to chatter volubly in Spanish.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE OLD MEXICAN.

"WELL, if they weren't robbers they were a first-class imitation," responded Bob. "There's Jerry and Ned knocked out, at any rate, and they nearly did for me. They would have, only I bit the chap's ear. I guess I'll know him again; he has my mark on him."

"Bit his ear! The *Americano* is brave! But we must see to the poor unfortunate señors! Robbers! Impossible!"

By this time the whole inn was aroused and the courtyard was filled with servants and guests. Water was brought and with it Jerry and Ned were revived.

"What happened?" began Jerry. "Oh, I remember now! Did they get our money?"

"I guess they got yours and Ned's," said Bob, in sorrowful tones, as he noted his chums' disordered clothing and saw that the money-belts were gone. "They didn't get mine, though, so we're not in such bad luck, after all. How do you feel?"

"As if a road-roller had gone over me," replied Jerry.

"Same here," put in Ned, holding his head in his hands. "He must have given me a pretty good whack. Who was it robbed us?"

"Are you sure you were robbed, señors?" asked the hotel keeper. "Perhaps you may have been dreaming."

"Does that look as if it was only a nightmare?" asked Ned, showing a big lump on his head.

"Or this?" added Jerry, showing his clothing cut with a knife where the robber had slashed it in order to take out the money-belt.

"No, it was not a dream," murmured the innkeeper. "There must have been robbers here. I wonder who they were?"

"They didn't leave their cards, so it's hard to say," remarked Jerry. "I don't suppose the burglars down here are in the habit of sending word in advance of their visit, or of telling the police where to find them after they commit a crime."

"Never! Never!" exclaimed the Mexican host. "But speaking of the police, I must tell them about this some time to-morrow."

"Any time will do," put in Ned. "We're in no hurry, you know."

"I am glad of that," said the hotel keeper, in all seriousness. "Most *Americanos* are in such a rush, and I have to go to market to-morrow. The

next day will do very well. I thank you, señors. Now I bid you good-night, and pleasant dreams."

"Well, he certainly does take things easy," said Jerry, when the innkeeper and his servants, with many polite bows, had withdrawn. "He don't seem to care much whether we were nearly killed or not. I guess this must be a regular occurrence down here."

"I always heard the Mexican brigands were terrible fellows," said Professor Snodgrass. "Now I am sure of it. I am glad they did not get any of my specimens, however. All my treasures are safe."

"But Ned and I have lost five hundred dollars each," put in Jerry.

"You can get more from the gold mine," went on the professor.

"Yes; but it may spoil our trip," said Ned.

"I have my five hundred dollars," said Bob.

"And I have nearly one thousand in bills," spoke the professor, in a whisper. "We will have enough. The robbers would never suspect me of carrying money. Listen; it is in the box with the big lizard and the bat, and no one will ever look there for it," and he chuckled in silent glee.

"Then I guess we can go on," said Jerry. "But I wonder who it was robbed us?"

"I suppose it was the Mexican brigands that hang about every hotel," said Ned.

"I'm not so sure of that," went on Jerry. "You know Noddy Nixon and his crowd are not far off. It may have been they."

"That's so; I never thought of them," said Ned.

"Did you recognize any one?"

"The fellow who grappled with me had a mask on," said Jerry. "But I thought I recognized that fellow Dalsett. However, I couldn't be sure."

"I didn't get a chance to see my man," Ned added.

"The fellow who came for me had a voice like Bill Berry's," put in Bob. "If I could see his ear I could soon tell."

"It will be a good while before you see his ear," continued Jerry. "I wonder if it was Nixon's crowd, or only ordinary robbers? If we are to be attacked by Noddy and his gang all the way through Mexico the trip will not be very pleasant."

"Well, there's only one thing certain, and that is, the money-belts are gone," put in Ned, gazing ruefully at his waist around which he had strapped his cash. "The next question is, who took them?"

"Which same question is likely to remain unanswered for some time," interrupted Professor Snodgrass. "Now, don't worry, boys. We are still able to continue on our search for the buried city. This will teach us a lesson not to go to sleep

again unless some one is on guard. The money loss is nothing compared to the possibility that one of us might have been killed, or some of my specimens stolen. Now we had better all go to bed again."

"Shall we stand guard for the remainder of the night?" asked Bob.

"I think it will not be necessary," spoke the professor. The robbers are not likely to return."

So, extinguishing the lantern which the innkeeper had left, the travelers once more sought their cots, on which they had a somewhat fitful rest until morning.

At breakfast the innkeeper urged the travelers to spend a few days at his hotel, saying he had sent for a Government officer to come and make an investigation of the robbery. But the boys and the professor, thanking their host for his invitation, called for their bill, settled it, and were soon puffing away through the forest once more.

For several hours they journeyed on beneath giant palms which lined either side of the road. The scenery was one unending vista of green, in which mingled brilliant-hued flowers. Wild parrots and other birds flitted through the trees and small animals rustled through the underbrush as the automobile dashed by.

Jerry was at the steering wheel and was sending

the car along at a good clip, when, as he suddenly rounded a curve he shut off the power and applied the brakes. Not a moment too soon was he, for he stopped the machine only a few feet from an aged Mexican, who was traveling along the road, aiding his faltering steps with a large, wooden staff.

The Mexican glanced at the auto which, with throbbing breath, as the engine still continued to vibrate, seemed to fill him with terror. Suddenly he dropped to his knees and began to pray.

"Be not afraid," Professor Snodgrass called to him, speaking in the Spanish language. "We are but poor travelers like yourself. We will not harm you."

"Whence do you come in your chariot of fire?" asked the old man. "Ye are demons and no true men!"

"We will not hurt you," said the naturalist, again. "See, we bring you gifts," and he held out to the Mexican a package of tobacco and a small hand-mirror. The old man's eyes brightened at the sight of them. He rose to his feet and took them, though his hands trembled.

In a moment he had rolled a cigarette of the tobacco, and, puffing out great clouds of smoke, complacently gazed at his image in the looking-glass.

"Truly ye are men and not demons," he said.

"The tobacco is very good. But whence come ye, and whither do ye go?"

"We are travelers from a far land," answered the professor. "Whither we go we scarcely know. We are searching for the unknown."

The aged Mexican started. Then he gazed fixedly at the professor.

"It may be that I can tell whither ye journey," he said. "For your kindness to me I am minded to look into the future for you. Shall I?"

"No one can look into the future," answered the naturalist. "No one knows what is going to happen." For the professor was no believer in anything but what nature revealed to him.

"Unbelievers! Unbelievers!" muttered the old man, blowing out a great cloud of smoke. "But ye shall see. I will read what is to happen for you."

He sat down at the side of the road. In the dust he drew a circle. This he divided into twelve parts, and in one he placed a small quantity of powder, which he took from his sash. The powder he lighted with a match. There was a patch of fire, and a cloud of yellow smoke. For an instant the old man was hidden from view. Then his voice was heard.

"Ye seek the unknown, hidden and buried city of ancient Mexico!" he said, in startling tones. "And ye shall find it. Yea, find it sooner than ye think, and in a strange manner. Look behind ye!"

Involuntarily the boys and the professor turned.

"Nothing there," grunted Ned, as he looked to where the old man had been seated. To his astonishment, as well as the surprise of the others, the aged Mexican had disappeared.

CHAPTER IX.

A VIEW OF THE ENEMY.

"WHERE is he?" cried Bob.

"He must have gone down through a hole in the earth," said Ned. "I didn't have my eyes off him three seconds. He didn't go down the road or we would have seen him, and he couldn't have run into the bushes on either side without making a great racket. He's a queer one."

"Just like the East Indian jugglers I've read about," put in Jerry.

"I think probably he was something on that order," agreed Professor Snodgrass. "Strange how he should have known about the buried city, and we have spoken to no one about it since we came to Mexico."

"Let's look and see if we can find a trace of him," suggested Bob.

The boys alighted from the car. They made a careful search around the spot where the old man had sat. There was the circle he had drawn in the dust, and the mark where the powder had burned, but not another trace of the Mexican could

they find. They looked behind trees and rocks, but all they found was big toads and lizards that hopped and crawled away as they approached. The professor annexed several of the reptiles for specimens.

"How do you explain it all?" asked Jerry of the naturalist, when they had taken their seats in the automobile again. "Have those men any supernatural powers?"

"I do not believe they have," replied the professor. "They do some things that are hard to explain, but they are sharp enough to do their tricks under their own conditions, and they disappear before those who can see them have gotten over their momentary surprise."

"The disappearing was the funny part of it," went on Jerry. "I can understand how he made the smoke. A pinch of gunpowder would produce that. But how did he dissolve himself into thin air?"

"He didn't," replied the naturalist. "I'll tell you how that was done. It is a favorite trick in India. When he suddenly called to us to look behind us he took advantage of our momentary glance away to hide himself."

"But where?"

"Behind that big rock," and the naturalist pointed to a large one near where the Mexican had been sitting.

"But we looked behind that," said Ned.

"Yes, several minutes after the disappearance," went on the professor, with a laugh. "This was how he did it: He wore a long, gray cloak, which, perhaps, you didn't notice. It was exactly the color of the stone and was partly draped over it. It was there all the while he was doing his trick. I saw it, but thought nothing of it at the time. Now, when he had finished the hocus-pocus, and when our heads were turned, he just rolled himself up into a ball and got under the cloak by the stone. Of course, it looked as if he had dropped down through the earth."

"But how about him getting away so completely that our search didn't reveal him?" asked Jerry.

"I think he waited a while and then, when he heard us getting out of the automobile he took advantage of the confusion to crawl, still under his cloak, into the bushes, perhaps by a path he alone knew. There really is no mystery to it."

"How about him telling us we were searching for the buried city?" asked Bob. "Wasn't that mind-reading?"

"I think he knew that part of it," said the professor, "though it seemed strange to me at first. "You must remember that the object of our trip was pretty freely talked of back in the gold camp. Some one may have come here from there before we started, and, in some manner, this old Mexican

may have heard of us. He may even have been waiting for us. No; it looks queer when it happens, but reasoned out, it is natural enough. However, I am glad to know we are on the right road and will find what we are searching for, though the old man may be mistaken."

"Shall we go forward again?" asked Jerry, resuming his place at the steering wheel.

"Forward it is!" cried Ned. "Ho, for the buried city!"

Once more the auto puffed along the forest road. It was warm with the heat of the tropics, and the boys were soon glad to take off their coats and collars. Even with the breeze created by the movement of the machine, it was oppressive.

"I say, when are we going to eat?" asked Bob. "I know it's long past noon."

"Wrong for once, Chunky," answered Ned, looking at his watch. "It's only eleven o'clock."

"Well, here's a good place to stop and eat, anyhow," went on the stout lad, to whom eating never came amiss.

"All right, we'll camp," put in Jerry, bringing the machine to a stop.

It was rather pleasant in the shade of the forest in spite of the heat, and the boys enjoyed it very much. The gasolene stove was lighted and Ned made some chocolate, for, since their advent into Mexico the travelers had come to like this bever-

age, which almost every one down in that country drinks. With this and some frijoles and cold chicken brought from the inn, they made a good meal.

"I'm going to hunt for some specimens," announced the professor. "You boys can rest here for an hour or so."

With his green collecting box and his butterfly net the naturalist disappeared along a path that led through the forest.

"I suppose he'll come back with a blue-nosed baboon or a flat-headed gila monster," said Ned. "He does find the queerest things."

It was almost an hour later, when the boys were wondering what had become of the naturalist, that they heard faint shouts in the direction he had taken.

"Hurry, boys!" the professor's voice called. "Hurry! Help! help! I'm caught!"

"He's in trouble again!" exclaimed Ned. "We must go to his rescue!"

"Have you got your revolver?" asked Jerry, as Ned was about to rush away.

"No; it's in the auto."

"Better get it. I'll take a rifle along. Bob, you bring the rope. No telling what has happened, and we may need all three."

With rifle, revolver and rope the three boys rushed into the forest to the rescue of their

friend. They could hear his shouts more plainly now.

"Hurry or he'll kill me!" cried the professor.

Running at top speed the boys emerged into a sort of clearing. There they saw a sight that filled them with terror.

Professor Snodgrass was standing underneath a tree, from one of the lower branches of which a big snake had dropped its sinuous folds about him. The reptile was slowly winding its coils about the unfortunate man, tightening and tightening them. Its ugly head was within a few feet of the professor's face, and the man was striking at the snake with the butterfly net.

"We're coming! We'll save you!" shouted Jerry.

The boy started to run close to the naturalist, intending to get near enough to fire at the snake's head without danger of hitting the professor.

"Look out!" yelled Bob, pointing to the ground in front of the tree. "There's another of the reptiles!"

As he spoke a second snake reared its head from the grass, right in the path Jerry would have taken. Bob had warned him just in time.

Jerry dropped to one knee. He took quick but careful aim at the snake on the ground and fired. The reptile thrashed about in a death struggle, for the bullet had crashed through its head.

"Now for the other one!" cried Jerry.

He ran in close to the reptile that was slowly crushing the professor to death. The unfortunate naturalist could no longer cry for help, so weak was he.

Jerry placed the muzzle of the rifle close to the snake's head, and pulled the trigger. The ugly folds relaxed, the long, sinuous body straightened out and the professor would have fallen had not Jerry, dropping his gun, caught him. The other boys came to his aid, and they carried the naturalist to one side and placed him on the grass.

Bringing water from a nearby spring, Bob soon restored the professor to his senses.

"I'm all right," said the collector in a few minutes. "The breath was about squeezed out of me, though."

"You had a narrow escape," said Ned.

"Thanks to you boys, it ended fortunately," said the naturalist. "You see, I was trying to capture a new kind of tree-toad, and I didn't see the snake until it had me in its folds. I'll be more careful next time."

In a little while the professor was able to walk. Jerry recovered his gun and the whole party made their way back to the auto.

The camp utensils were soon packed up and the journey was resumed.

"I wonder what sort of an inn we'll stop at to-

night?" said Bob. "I hope they don't have any robbers."

"We won't run any chances," spoke Ned. "We'll post a guard."

For several hours the auto chugged along. As it came to the top of a hill the boys saw below them quite a good-sized village.

"There's where we'll spend the night," remarked Jerry. "Hello! What's that?" and he pointed to some object round a turn of the road, just ahead of them.

"It looks like an automobile," said the professor.

"It is!" cried Ned. "And Noddy Nixon is in it!"

CHAPTER X.

SOME TRICKS IN MAGIC.

"YOU don't mean it!" exclaimed the professor. "Noddy Nixon, the young man who made all the trouble for us! I thought we had seen the last of him."

"I hoped we had," said Jerry. "But you can't always get what you want in this world."

"No, indeed! There is a purple grasshopper I've been hunting for for nearly five years, and I never found it!" spoke the naturalist.

"I wonder if Noddy saw us?" asked Ned.

"It doesn't make much difference," was Bob's opinion. "He'll run across us sooner or later. If he stops in the same village we do he's sure to hear about us."

"Then we may as well put up overnight in this town," said Jerry, sending the machine ahead again. Though the boys kept a close watch, they saw no more of Noddy, for his automobile disappeared around a turn of the road.

When the red touring car came up to the village, such a crowd of curious Mexicans surrounded the auto that the occupants had difficulty in descending.

"I guess Noddy couldn't have come here, or these people wouldn't be so curious about our car," said Bob.

"Oh, you can depend on it, he's somewhere in the neighborhood," was Ned's opinion.

The keeper of the tavern, running out, bowed low to the prospective guests.

"Enter, señors!" he exclaimed. "You are welcome a thousand times. The whole place is yours."

"Will you guarantee that there are no robbers?" asked Jerry.

"Robbers, señors? Not one of the rascals within a thousand miles!"

"And will my bugs, snakes and specimens be safe?" asked the professor.

"Bugs and snakes! Santa Maria! What do you want of such reptiles? Of course they will be safe. The most wretched thief, of which there are none here, would not so much as lay a finger on them."

"Then we will stay," said the naturalist.

"Out of the way, dogs, cattle, swine, pigs and beasts!" cried the innkeeper, brushing the crowd aside. "Let the noble señors enter!"

At these words, spoken in fierce tones, though mine host was smiling the while, the throng parted, and the boys, accompanied by the professor, made their way to the inn.

It was not long before supper was served. There were the frijoles and tortillas, without which no Mexican meal of ordinary quality is complete, but the adventurers had not yet become used to this food. Then, too, there was delicious chocolate, such as can be had nowhere but in Mexico.

While the meal was in progress the travelers noticed that there was considerable excitement about the inn. Crowds of people seemed to be going and coming, all of them talking loudly, and most of them laughing.

"What is it all about?" asked Jerry.

"To-day is a fête day," replied the innkeeper. "No one has worked, and to-night there is an entertainment in the village square. Every one will attend. It will be a grand sight."

"What sort of entertainment?"

"I know only what I heard, that a most wonderful magician will do feats. Ah, some of those performers are very imps of darkness!" and the man muttered a prayer beneath his breath.

"That sounds interesting. Let's go," suggested Bob.

"I haven't any objection," said Jerry. "Will you go, Professor?"

"I will go anywhere where there is a chance I may add to the stock of scientific knowledge," replied the naturalist. "Lead on, I'll follow."

The meal over, the boys and professor had only

to follow the crowd in order to reach the public square. A centre space had been roped off, and in the middle of this a small tent was erected.

On the payment of a small sum to some officials, who seemed to be acting as ushers, the travelers managed to get places in the front row. There they stood, surrounded by swarthy Mexican men, women and boys, waiting for the performance to begin.

Suddenly from within the tent sounded some weird music: the shrill scraping of fiddle and the beat of tom-toms. Then a voice was heard chanting. A few seconds later a young man, dressed completely in white, stepped from the tent and sat down, cross-legged, on the ground. A score of flaring torches about him gave light, for it was now night.

He spread a cloth on the ground, sprinkled a few drops of water on it, muttered some words, whisked away the covering, and there was a tiny dwarfed tree, its branches bearing fruit.

"The old Indian mango trick!" exclaimed the professor. "I have seen it done better, many times."

The next trick was more elaborate. The youth in white clapped his hands and a boy came running from the tent. With him he brought a basket. The youth began to scold the boy, beating him with a stick.

To escape the blows, the boy leaped into the basket. In a trice the youth clapped the cover on. Then drawing a sword at his side, the youth plunged it into the wicker-work several times. From the basket horrible cries came, growing fainter and fainter at each thrust of the weapon.

With a cry of satisfaction the youth finally held his sword aloft. The boys could see that it ran red, as if with blood.

"Has he stabbed him?" asked Bob, in frightened tones.

"Watch," said the professor, with a smile.

The youth opened the basket. It was empty. The boy had disappeared. The youth gave a cry of astonishment, and gazed up into the starlit sky. Naturally, every one in the crowd gazed upward, likewise. All at once there was a cry from behind the youth, and the boy who had been in the basket, laughing and capering about as if being thrust through with a sword was the biggest joke in the world, moved among the assemblage, collecting coins in his cap.

"Another old Indian trick," said the professor. "He simply curled up close to the outer rim of the basket and the sword went through the middle, where his body formed a circle."

"But the blood!" exclaimed Bob.

"The boy had a sponge wet with red liquid, and when the sword blade came through the basket he

wiped the crimson stuff on it," explained the professor.

The tricks seemed to please the crowd very much, for few of them saw how they were done. The Mexicans cried for more.

The youth and boy retired to the tent. Their place was taken by an old man, wrapped in a cloak. He produced a long rope, which he proceeded to knot about his body, tying himself closely. Then he signed for two of the spectators to take hold, one at either end of the cord, which extended from under his cloak. Two men did as he desired.

Then the old man began a sort of chant. He waved his hands in the air. With a quick motion he threw something at one of the torches. A cloud of smoke arose. There was a wild cry from the two men who held the rope. When the vapor cleared away the magician was nowhere to be seen, though his cloak lay on the ground and the men still held the ends of the rope that had bound him.

An instant later there came a laugh from a tree off to the left. Every one turned to look, and the old man jumped down from among the branches.

"He tied fake knots," said the professor. "While he was waving his hands he managed to undo them. Then he threw some powder in the torch flame, and while the smoke blinded every one he slipped out of his bonds and cloak, went through the crowd like a snake, and climbed a tree.

The tricks are nothing to what I have seen in Egypt and India."

"Perhaps there is nothing wonderful but in India or Egypt," spoke a voice at the professor's elbow. He turned with a start, to see the old magician standing near him. The naturalist had not spoken aloud, yet it seemed that the Mexican had heard him.

"There are stranger things in this land than in Egypt," went on the trickster. "Buried cities are stranger. Buried cities, where there is much gold to be had and great riches."

"What do you know about buried cities?" asked the professor.

"Ask him who sat in the road, who drew the circle in the dust. Ask him whom ye vainly sought," replied the Mexican, with a laugh.

The professor started.

"It can't be! Yes, it is. It's the same Mexican we met before, and to whom I gave the tobacco," said the naturalist.

"Si, señor," was the answer, as the old man bowed low. "And be assured that though you mock at my poor magic, yet I can look into the future for you. I tell you," and he leaned over and whispered, "you shall soon find what you seek, the mysterious city. You are on the right road. Keep on. When ye reach a place where the path turns to the left, at the sign where ye shall see the

laughing serpent, take that path. See, the stars tell that you will meet with good fortune."

With a dramatic gesture the old man pointed aloft. Involuntarily the professor and the boys looked up. Then, remembering the trick that had been played on them before, they looked for the Mexican. But he had disappeared.

CHAPTER XI.

NODDY NIXON'S PLOT.

"His old trick again," murmured the professor. "I should have been on my guard. However, it doesn't matter. But come on, boys. If we stand out here our plans will soon be known to every one."

The travelers went back to their hotel, but the crowds of people remained at the square, for there were other antics of the entertainers to follow.

"I wonder if we'll have to sleep *'en el sereno'* to-night?" said Bob. "If we do, I'm going to stay awake."

"Yes, indeed; if they treat Chunky the way they did Jerry and myself, we'll be stranded," put in Ned. "Have you got it all right, Chunky?"

What "it" was, Ned did not say; but Bob understood, and, feeling where his money-belt encircled his waist, nodded to indicate that it was still in place.

The travelers found there was plenty of room in the hotel. They were given a large apartment with four beds in it, and told they could sleep there

together. They found that the room had but one door to it, and all the windows were too high up to admit of easy entrance. So, building a barricade of chairs in front of the portal, the adventurers decided it would not be necessary to stand guard. If any one came into the apartment he would have to make noise enough to awaken the soundest sleeper.

Thus protected, the travelers went to bed. Nor were their slumbers disturbed by the advent of any robbers. However, if they could have seen what was taking place in a small hut on the outskirts of the town, about midnight, they might not have slept as peacefully.

Within a small adobe house, well concealed in a grove of trees, five figures were grouped around a table on which burned a candle stuck in a bottle.

"I'll make trouble for Jerry Hopkins and his friends yet," spoke a youth, pounding the table with his fist.

"That's what you're always saying, Noddy Nixon," put in a man standing over in the shadow.

"Well, I mean it this time, Tom Dalsett. We'd have put them out of business long ago if I'd had my way."

"Well, what are you going to do this time?" asked a lad, about Noddy's age, whom, had the Motor Boys seen him, they would have at once

known for Jack Pender, though he had become quite stout and bronzed by his travels.

"I've got a plan," went on Noddy. "I didn't come over to Mexico for nothing."

"What do you s'pose they come for?" asked Bill Berry, who was busy cleaning his revolver.

"To locate a silver mine, of course," replied Noddy. "Ain't that so, Vasco?" and Nixon turned to a slick-looking Mexican, who was rolling a cigarette. The fellow was a halfbreed, having some American blood in his veins.

"Si, señor," was the reply. "Trust Vasco Bilette for finding out things. I heard them talking about a mine."

"Of course; I told you so," said Noddy.

The truth of it was that Bilette had heard nothing of the sort, but thought it best to agree with Noddy.

"I hope we have better luck getting in on this mine than we did on their gold mine," said Pender.

"Well, rather!" put in Dalsett.

"Leave it to me," went on Noddy. "I have a plan. And now do you fellows want to stay here all night or travel in the auto?"

"Stay here," murmured Bilette. "It is warm and comfortable. One can smoke here." Then, as if that settled it, he rolled himself up in his blanket, and, with a last puff on his cigarette, he went to sleep on the floor.

In a little while the others followed his example. Bilette slept better than any one, for he seemed to be used to the hordes of fleas that infested the hut.

As for Noddy, he awakened several times because of the uncomfortableness of his bed. Finally he got up and went out to sit up the rest of the night on the cushioned seats of the automobile.

So far, the Nixon crowd had done nothing but ride on a sort of pleasure trip through Mexico. Noddy had managed to get some cash from home, and, with what Dalsett obtained by gambling, they managed to live.

Shortly after crossing the Rio Grande River, Noddy had fallen in with a slick Mexican, Vasco Bilette by name, and had added him to his party. Bilette knew the country well, and was of considerable assistance. He seemed to have no particular occupation. Some evenings, when they would be near a large town, he would disappear. He always turned up in the morning with plenty of cash. How he got it he never said.

But once he returned with a knife wound in the hand, and again, limping slightly from a bullet in the leg. From which it might be inferred that Vasco used other than gentle and legitimate means of making a livelihood. But Noddy's crowd was not one that asked embarrassing questions.

With no particular object in view, Noddy had driven his car hither and thither. However, acci-

dentally hearing that Jerry and his friends had come over into Mexico, Noddy determined to remain in their vicinity, learn their plans, and, if possible, thwart them to his own advantage.

Fortunately, the boys and the professor, soundly sleeping at their inn, could not look into the future and see the dangers they were to run, all because of Noddy and his gang. If they could have, they might have turned back.

Bright and early the next morning Professor Snodgrass awoke. He looked out of the window, saw that the sun was shining, and rejoiced that the day was to be pleasant. Then he happened to spy a new kind of a fly buzzing around the room.

"Ah, I must have you!" exclaimed the naturalist, unlimbering his insect net. "Easy now, easy!"

On tiptoes he began encircling the room after the fly. The buzzer seemed in no mood to be caught, and the professor made several ineffectual attempts to ensnare it. Finally the insect lighted on Bob's nose, as the boy still slumbered.

"Now I have you!" the professor cried. He forgot that Bob might have some feelings, and thinking only of the rare fly, he brought the net down smartly on Bob's countenance.

"Help! Help! Robbers! Thieves!" shouted the boy.

"Keep still! Don't move! I have it now!" yelled

the professor, gathering up his net with the fly in it. "Ah, there you are, my little beauty!"

Ned and Jerry tumbled out of their beds, Ned with his revolver ready in his hand.

"Oh, I thought it was some one after my money-belt," said Bob, when his eyes were fully opened and he saw the professor.

"Sorry to disturb you," said the naturalist. "But it's in the interest of science, my dear young friend, and science is no respecter of persons."

"Nor of my nose, either," observed Bob, rubbing his proboscis with a rueful countenance.

There came a loud pounding at the door.

"Who's there?" asked Jerry.

" 'Tis I, the landlord," was the answer. "What is it? Have the brigands come? Is the place on fire? Why did the señor yell, as if some one had stuck a knife into him?"

"It was only me," called Bob. "The professor caught a new kind of fly on my nose."

"A fly! On your nose! *Diablo!* Those *Americanos!* They are crazy!" the innkeeper muttered as he went away.

"Well, we're up; I suppose we may as well stay up," said Ned, stretching and yawning. "My, but I did sleep good!"

They all agreed that the night's sleep had been a restful one. They dressed, had breakfast, and, in

spite of the entreaties of the landlord to stay a few days, they were soon on the road in the automobile.

"I'm glad to know we are on the right path," said the professor, after several miles had been covered. "I only hope that old Mexican was not joking with us."

"What was that he said about turning to the left?" asked Ned.

"We are to turn when we come to the place where the laughing monkey is," said Bob.

"Serpent was what he said," observed Jerry. "The laughing serpent. I wonder what that can be. I never saw a snake laugh."

"It might be a figure of speech, or he may have meant there is a stone image carved in that design set up to mark a road," spoke the professor. "However, we shall see."

Dinner was eaten in a little glade beside a small brook, where some fish were caught. Then, while the boys stretched out on the grass, the professor, who was never idle, took a small rifle and said he would go into the forest and see if he could not get a few specimens.

"Look out for snakes!" called Ned.

"I will," replied the naturalist, remembering his former experience.

About an hour later, when Jerry was just beginning to think it was time to start off, the stillness

of the forest was broken by a terrible and blood-curdling yell.

"A tiger!" cried Bob.

"There are no tigers here," said Jerry. "But it's some wild beast!"

The yell was repeated. Then came a crashing of the underbrush, followed by a wild call for help.

"That's the professor!" cried Jerry, seizing his rifle.

CHAPTER XII.

NODDY SCHEMES WITH MEXICANS.

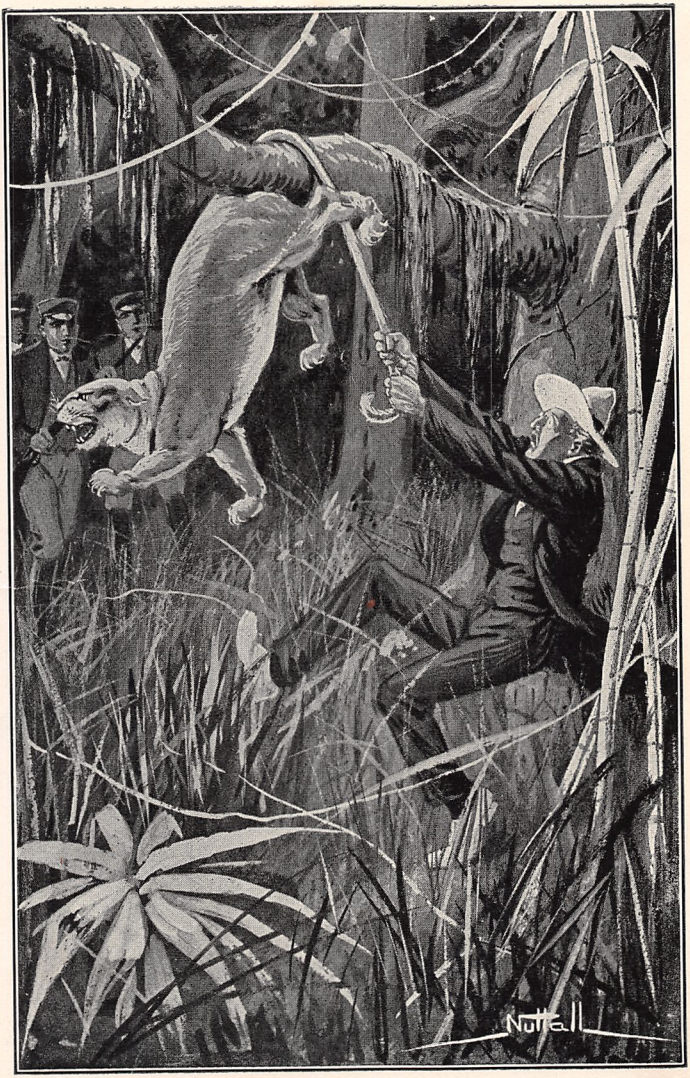
THE boys crashed through the bushes and under the low branches of trees in the direction of the professor's voice. They could hear him more plainly now.

"Help! Help! Come quick!" the naturalist cried.

The sight that met the boys' eyes when they came out into a little clearing of the forest was at once calculated to amuse and alarm them. They saw the professor clinging to the tail of a mountain lion, the beast being suspended over a low tree-limb, with the naturalist hanging on one side of the branch and the animal on the other, the brute in the air and the professor on the ground.

The infuriated beast was struggling and wiggling to get free from the grip the professor had of its tail. It snarled and growled, now and then giving voice to a fierce roar, and endeavoring to swing far enough back to bite or claw the naturalist.

As for Professor Snodgrass, he was clinging to



THEY SAW THE PROFESSOR CLINGING TO THE TAIL OF A MOUNTAIN LION.
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the tail with both hands for dear life, and trying to keep as far as possible away from the dangerous teeth and claws of the lion.

"Let go!" yelled Jerry.

"I dare not!" shouted the professor. "If I do the brute will fall to the ground and eat me up. I can't let go, and I can't hold on much longer. Hurry up, boys, and do something!"

"How did you get that way?" asked Bob.

"I'll—tell—you—later!" panted the poor professor, as he was swung clear from the ground by a particularly energetic movement of the beast. "Hurry! Hurry! The tail is slipping through my fingers!"

In fact, this seemed to be the case, and the beast was now nearer the ground, while the length of tail the naturalist grasped was lessened.

The big cat-like creature suddenly began swinging to and fro, like a pendulum. At each swing it came closer and closer to the professor. All the while it was spitting and snarling in a rage. Suddenly the professor gave a yell louder than any he had uttered.

"Ouch! He bit me that time!" he cried. "Hurry, boys!"

The lads saw that the situation now had more of seriousness than humor in it. Jerry crept up close and, with cocked rifle, waited for a chance to fire at the beast without hitting the professor.

At that instant the lion made a strong, backward swing, and its claws caught in the professor's trousers. The beast tried to sink its teeth in the naturalist's legs, but with a quick movement the professor himself jumped back, and, with his own momentum and that of the lion to aid him, he swung in a complete circle around the limb of the tree, the lion going with him, so their positions were exactly reversed.

"Steady now! I have him!" called Jerry.

The change in the positions of man and beast had given the boy the very opportunity he wanted. The animal was now nearest to him. Quickly raising the rifle, Jerry sent a bullet into the brute's head, following it up with two others. The lion, with a last wild struggle to free itself, dangled limply from the tree-limb, from which it was still suspended by the professor's hold on its tail.

Seeing that his enemy was dead, and could do him no harm, the naturalist let go his grip and the big cat fell in a heap on the ground.

"Once more you boys have saved my life," said the collector, as he mopped his brow, for his exertions in trying to keep free from the beast had not been easy.

"Are you bit much?" asked Ned.

"Nothing more than scratches," was the reply.

"How in the world did you ever get in such a scrape?" asked Jerry.

"I'll tell you how it was," answered the professor. "You see, I was busy collecting bugs and small reptiles, going from tree to tree. When I came to this one I saw what I thought was a small, yellow snake. I believed I had a fine prize.

"I approached without making a sound, and when I was near enough I made a grab for what I imagined was the snake. Instead, it turned out to be the tail of the mountain lion, which dangled from the limb, on which the beast was crouched. All at once there was a terrible commotion."

"I would say there was!" interrupted Ned. "We heard it over where we were."

"Yes, of course," resumed the professor. "Well, as soon as I got the tail in my hands I found I had made a mistake. It was then too late to let go, so the only thing to do was to hold on. It was rather a peculiar position to be in."

"It certainly was," said Jerry, with a laugh.

"Yes, of course. Well, seeing that the only thing to do was to keep my grip, I kept it and yelled for help. I guess the lion was as badly scared as I was first, when it felt me grab its tail. After it found I wasn't going to let go it got mad, I guess."

"It acted so, at any rate," put in Bob.

"Yes, of course," went on the professor. "Well, anyhow, I knew if I did let go I would be clawed to pieces, so there I hung, like the man on the tail

of the mad bull, not daring to let go. Then you came, and you know the rest."

"Are you sure you're not hurt?" asked Ned.

"Sure," was the reply. "I was too lively for the lion. I'm sorry the tail didn't turn out to be a snake, though, for if it had been I'm sure it would have been a rare specimen."

Leaving the dead body of the animal where it had fallen, the travelers went back to their auto. The camp utensils were packed away, and soon, with Ned at the steering wheel, the machine was running off the miles that separated the adventurers from the hidden city they hoped to find.

They traveled until nearly nightfall, and came to no village or settlement. It began to look as if they would have to camp in the open, when, just as darkness was approaching, they came to a small adobe hut in the midst of a sugar-cane plantation.

"Maybe we can stop here overnight," said Jerry.

An aged Mexican and his wife came to the door of the cabin to see the strange fire-wagon pass. Speaking to them in Spanish, the professor asked if he and his companions could get beds for the night. At first the man seemed to hesitate, but the rattling of a few coins in Bob's pockets soon changed his mind, and he bade the travelers enter.

The woman quickly got a fairly good meal, and

then, after sitting about for an hour or so and talking over the events of the day, the travelers sought their beds. They found themselves in one apartment, containing two small, cane couches, neither one hardly big enough for a single occupant.

"However, it's better than sleeping out of doors, where the mosquitoes can carry you away," said Ned.

Contrary to their expectations, the travelers slept good, the only trouble being the fleas, which were particularly numerous. But by this time they had become somewhat used to this Mexican pest.

While the professor and the boys were taking a well-earned rest, quite a different scene was being enacted by Noddy Nixon and his companions.

Following a half-formed plan he had in mind, Noddy had hung on the trail of the Motor Boys. He had followed them from the inn where they last stopped, and now he was camped out, with his followers, about five miles from the adobe hut. But Jerry and his friends did not know this.

"Isn't it pretty near time you told us what you are going to do, Noddy?" asked Jack Pender, as he piled some wood on the camp-fire.

"I'll tell you," spoke Noddy. "We're going to follow them until they locate their mine, and then we're going to stake a claim right near theirs. They're not going to get all the gold or silver in this country the way they did in Arizona."

"Are you sure it's a mine they're after?" asked Bilette, puffing at his cigarette.

"Of course," replied Noddy. "What else could it be? Didn't you hear that's what they came for?"

"I don't know," went on the slick Mexican. "I only asked for information. If it's a mine they're after we'll need a bigger force than we have to run things."

"Where can we get help?" asked Noddy.

"I'll show you," replied Vasco. He put his fingers to his lips and whistled shrilly.

An instant later half a dozen Mexicans stepped from the shadow of the trees and stood in a line, in the glare of the fire.

"Well, you didn't lose any time over it," observed Noddy. "Where did they come from, and who are they?" and the bully looked a little uneasy.

"They came from the greenwood," replied Vasco Bilette, "for the forest is their home. And they are friends of mine, so now both your questions are answered."

"If they're friends of yours I s'pose it's all right," went on Noddy.

"Well, rather!" drawled Vasco, lighting another cigarette from the stump of his last one.

"Will they help us?" went on Noddy.

Bilette addressed something in Spanish to his friends who had so mysteriously appeared.

"Si, señor," they exclaimed as one man, bowing to Noddy.

"Queer you happened to have 'em on hand," said Noddy, accepting the answer to his question, for he had learned a little Spanish, and knew that "si" meant yes.

"I anticipated we might need them," said Bilette. "So I told them to be on hand and in waiting to-night. They are very prompt."

"Then we'll join forces with them and show Jerry Hopkins and his crowd that he can't have everything his own way," growled Noddy. "Come on, we'll follow them now and see what they are doing," and Noddy seemed ready to start off.

"Not to-night; it's time to turn in," objected Bilette. "We'll begin early in the morning."

He spoke once more to the six men, who disappeared into the forest as quietly as they had come. Then Bilette, wrapping himself up in his cloak, went to sleep.

The others followed his example, and soon the camp was quiet. Noddy now had his plans in working order, and he thought, with satisfaction, of the revenge he would have.

CHAPTER XIII.

ON THE TRAIL.

"COME, come, boys! Are you going to sleep all day?" exclaimed Professor Snodgrass, the next morning.

His cheery voice awoke the others, and they sat up on the hard cots.

"Where are we? Oh, yes, I remember now!" said Bob. "I thought I was back at the gold mine."

"I dreamed I was back in Cresville," added Jerry. "I wonder how all the folks are. We must write some letters home."

After breakfast, which the Mexican and his wife served in an appetizing style, the travelers decided to delay their start an hour or two, and spend the time writing. Professor Snodgrass said he had no one to correspond with, so he wandered off with his net and specimen box, but the boys got out paper, pens and ink, and were soon busy scratching away.

In about two hours the professor returned, having collected a number of specimens and es-

caped getting into any difficulties or dangers for once.

"We'd better start," he called. "I'm anxious to get to that underground city. If that turns out half as well as I expect, our fortunes are made."

"Will it be better than the gold mine?" asked Bob, with a grin.

"The gold mine!" exclaimed the naturalist. "Why, I had rather reach this buried city than have half a dozen gold mines!"

He was very enthusiastic and seemed anxious to get on with the journey. The automobile was made ready, and, bidding their hosts good-by, the travelers were again under way.

As they progressed the road became rougher and more difficult of passage. In places it was so narrow that the automobile could barely be taken past the thick growth of foliage on either side.

The forest fairly teemed with animal life, while the flitting of brilliantly colored birds through the trees made the woods look as if a rainbow had burst and fallen from the sky. Parrots and macaws, gay in their vari-tinted plumage, called shrilly as the puffing auto invaded their domains.

It was necessary to run the car slowly. The professor fretted at the lack of speed, but nothing could be done about it, and, as Jerry said, it was better to be slow and sure. So they went on for several miles.

About noon the travelers came to the edge of a broad river, which cut in two the road they had been following.

"Here's a problem," said Jerry, bringing the car to a stop. "How are we going to get over that? No bridge and no ferry in sight."

"Perhaps it isn't as deep as it looks," suggested the professor.

"Tell you what!" exclaimed Ned. "We'll all go in for a swim and then we can tell whether it's too deep to run the auto across."

His plan was voted a good one, and soon the boys and Professor Snodgrass were splashing about in the water. Their bath was a refreshing one. Incidentally, Ned found out that he could wade across, the stream in one place coming only to his knees, while the bottom was of firm sand.

While the travelers were splashing about in the cool water, they might not have felt so unconcerned had they been able to look through the thick screen of foliage on the bank of the stream, and see what was taking place there.

Several dark-complexioned men, in company with Vasco Bilette, had dismounted from their horses and were watching the bathers.

"Well, I'm glad they decided to stop," remarked Vasco. "Our horses are tired from following their trail. They will probably camp for the night on the other bank, for they would be foolish to go

farther when they can find good water and fodder."

"You forget they do not nave a horse to consider," spoke one of the Mexicans. "Their machine does not eat."

"No more it does," said Bilette. "But they cannot go much farther. If necessary, we can cross the river and get at them."

"Is that Noddy boy and his puff-puff carriage to join us?" asked one of the crowd of Mexicans.

"That is the plan," replied Vasco. "He thought we could follow the trail on horses better than he could in the automobile, because that makes a noise, and those we are pursuing might hear it. So Noddy has kept about five miles behind. As for us, you know that we have been only a mile in the rear, thanks to the slowness with which they had to run their machine.

"Ah, the *Americanos* have finished their bath. Here they come back," went on Vasco, as the boys and the professor began wading toward the shore, near which they had left their auto.

Suddenly the professor set up a great splashing and made a grab under the water.

"I've got it! I've got it!" he yelled, holding something aloft.

"Got what?" asked Jerry.

"A rare specimen of the green-clawed crab," was the answer, and the naturalist held up to view

a wiggling crawfish. "It bit my big toe, but I grabbed it before it got away. This was indeed a profitable bath for me. That specimen is worth one hundred dollars."

"If there are crabs in there I don't see why there aren't fish," spoke Ned. "I'm going to try, anyhow."

Quickly dressing, he got out a line and hook, cut a pole and, with a grasshopper for bait, threw in. In three minutes he had landed a fine big fish, and several others followed in succession.

"I guess we'll have one good meal, anyhow," observed Ned.

"Shall we stay on this side and eat, or cross the river?" asked the professor.

"Might as well stay here," was Jerry's opinion.

So the portable stove was made ready and soon the appetizing smell of frying fish filled the air. The travelers made a good meal, and Vasco Bilette and his gang, hiding among the trees, smoked their cigarettes and wished they had a portion.

"But never mind, when we have the *Americanos* at our mercy we will be the ones who eat, and they will starve," was how Vasco consoled himself.

Dinner over, the travelers took their places in the auto, and, with Jerry at the wheel, the passage of the river was begun. Following the course Ned had tried, the machine was taken safely over the

stream, and run up the opposite bank. No sooner had it got on solid ground, however, than, with a loud noise, one of the rear tires burst.

"Here's trouble!" exclaimed Ned, as Jerry brought the car to a sudden stop.

"Might have been worse," commented Bob. "It might have blown out while we were in the water, and that would have been no joke."

"Right you are, Chunky," said Jerry. "Well, I suppose we may as well camp here for a spell; at least until the repairs are made."

He set to work to put in a new tube, Ned and Bob assisting him, while the professor wandered off after any stray specimens that might exist. He found several insects that he said were rare ones.

The fixing of the tire proved a harder job than Jerry had anticipated. It was several hours before it was repaired to suit him, and by then the sun was getting low.

"What do you say that we camp here for the night?" proposed Ned. "We can't get on much farther anyhow, and this is a nice place. It's more open than in the forest."

This was voted a good plan, so a fire was made and a camp staked out. From their side of the river Vasco and his companions viewed these preparations with satisfaction.

"They cannot escape us now," said the leader of

the Mexicans. "We can easily cross the river after dark and get close to them. I wish Noddy would hurry up."

At that instant there was the sound of wheels in the road, to the left of which Vasco and his men were concealed. In a little while Noddy, with Dalsett, Berry and Pender, rode up in the machine.

"Where are they?" asked Noddy, eagerly.

Vasco pointed through the screen of bushes to the other side of the bank, where the professor and boys were encamped.

"Good!" exclaimed Nixon. "We'll pay them a visit to-night."

All unconscious of the nearness of their foes, the Cresville boys, having had a good supper, sat talking about the camp-fire. The professor was engaged in sorting over the specimens he had gathered during the day.

At this same time Noddy and Dalsett, with Vasco and the six Mexicans the latter had provided, were preparing to cross the river, under cover of the darkness.

They did not undress, but waded in as they were, the gleaming camp-fire on the other side serving as a beacon to guide them.

"Softly!" cautioned Vasco, as the nine crawled up on the opposite bank, and began creeping toward the campers.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE ANGRY MEXICANS.

THE professor and the boys were thinking of getting out their blankets and turning in for the night. They sat in a circle about the camp-fire, talking over the events of the day.

Meanwhile, creeping nearer and nearer, Noddy, Vasco and their gang were encircling the camp of Jerry and his friends. They came so close that they could hear the conversation between the professor and the boys.

Now, if the Mexicans whom Vasco had engaged to assist him had not understood something of the English language, or if chance had so arranged matters that they had not come near enough to overhear the talk of Jerry and his comrades, this story might have had a different ending.

As it was, fate so willed matters that Noddy and his gang got close to the camp in time to hear the professor remark:

"Well, boys, it will not be many more days, I hope, before we reach the buried city we are searching for. And when we do I will be the proudest

man in the world. Think of discovering a buried town of ancient Mexico! Why, half the college professors would give their heads to be in my place."

"But we haven't found the city yet," said Ned.

"No; but I am sure we are on the right road," went on the professor. "I am sure of it, not only because of what the old Mexican magician told us, but from the map my friend left me. See, here it is," and he drew out the paper with the rude drawing on.

The boys drew close to look the map over once more.

"There seem to be two roads, one branching off to the right," remarked Jerry, pointing to the map. "And it looks as if there was some sort of an image at the parting of the ways."

"There is!" exclaimed the professor. "I never noticed it before, but there is the laughing serpent, as sure as you're a foot high!"

"We'll reach the buried city all right," spoke Bob. "I only hope we don't come upon it too unexpectedly."

"Well, the Mexican prophesied we would find it sooner than we thought," observed Ned. "But he may not have meant all he said. Anyhow, I'm sleepy and I'm going to turn in."

The others followed his example of wrapping themselves up in their blankets, and soon their deep

breathing told they were on the road to slumberland.

Meanwhile, the Mexicans who had listened to the above conversation were much disturbed. Though they did not understand all that had been said, they caught enough to indicate to them that the boys and the professor were not on a search for gold or silver mines, the only things in which the Mexicans were interested.

There were angry but low-voiced mutterings among the Mexicans. Soon they became angry, talked among themselves and grew quite excited. They talked rapidly to Vasco, in Spanish.

"What does all this mean, Noddy?" asked Bilette. "Have you fooled us?"

"No, no, it's all right!" exclaimed Nixon. "Their talk of a buried city is only a bluff to throw us off the track."

"Hardly, when they don't know we are following them," said Vasco. "I'm afraid that's not true, Noddy. Better own up and say you guessed at the whole thing."

"I didn't guess!' exclaimed Noddy.

"Too much talk! Not enough do!" exclaimed one of the Mexicans, striding forward and pushing Noddy to one side. Noddy resented this, and drew back his hand as if to strike the Mexican. The latter, quick as a flash, drew an ugly-looking knife.

"Put that up!" exclaimed Vasco, noting, in the

darkness, his companion's act. "We don't want to begin fighting among ourselves."

He stepped between Noddy and the Mexican, and pushed them away from each other. The Mexican muttered angrily, and his companions could be heard growling over the outcome of the affair. They could appreciate a gold or silver mine. A buried city was nothing to them, and they saw no use in pursuing the trail further. They were angry at Noddy for having brought them thus far on a foolish errand.

"Now keep quiet," advised Bilette. "The first thing you know you'll have them all aroused and then there'll be trouble."

"Diablo!" exclaimed one of the Mexicans, beneath his breath. "Are we fools or children? We leave the city and we travel for days through the wilderness. We are told we are to get great riches. Santa Maria! Is this money? Is this gold or silver? The crazy *Americanos* talk of nothing but lost cities. What care I for lost cities? What care any of us for lost cities? I hate lost cities!"

"And I! And I!" exclaimed his companions, in whispers.

"And this fellow, Noddy Nixon, is to blame for it all!" went on the angry Mexican. "He gets us all to come out here. We follow the crazy *Americano* who does nothing but grab bugs and toads. He is man to be afraid of! Yet we follow him,

and all for what? To find he is looking for some old ruins. I will not stand it!"

"Clear out of here!" commanded Billette. "If we stand here quarreling much longer they'll wake up."

Under the guidance of their leader, the Mexicans made their way back to the river bank. On the opposite shore they had left their horses and Noddy's automobile.

"What made you think they were after a mine, Noddy?" asked Bilette, when the party was well beyond earshot of the campers. "You must have made a mistake."

"Supposing I did," whispered Noddy, in low tones to Vasco, "what good will it do to tell every one? I may have failed on this plan, but I have another, even better."

"Better not try it until you find if it will work," advised Bilette. "My men are in no mood to be fooled a second time."

Disappointed and dejected, the Mexicans recrossed the river and made their camp on the opposite shore from Professor Snodgrass and the boys. The Mexicans were still in a surly mood, and Vasco had to keep close watch lest some one of them should harm Noddy.

Wet and cold, for if the days were hot the nights were chilly, the Nixon gang reached their camp. One of the men lighted a fire and cooked

some frijoles and tortillas. The meal, simple as it was, made every one feel better.

Nixon and Pender, as soon as they had finished eating, drew off to one side, leaving the Mexicans to talk among themselves.

"It looks as if we'd have trouble," said Noddy.

"It's all your fault," observed Pender.

"I'm not saying it isn't," put in Noddy. "But what's the use of crying over spilled milk? The question is: What are we going to do about it now?"

Pender was silent a few minutes. Then a thought seemed to come to him suddenly.

"I have it!" he exclaimed.

"What?" asked Noddy.

Jack leaned over and whispered something in his friend's ear. Noddy hesitated a moment, and then gave a start.

"The very thing!" he exclaimed. "I wonder I didn't think of it before."

He hurried to where Vasco was sitting, near the camp-fire, smoking a cigarette. To him he whispered what Pender had suggested.

"It's a risky thing to do," said the Mexican. "If it fails, we'll have to leave the country. If it succeeds we'll be in danger of heavy punishment from the authorities. However, I'm ready to risk it if you are. Shall I tell the men?"

"Of course," replied Noddy. "I want to make

it up to them for being mistaken about the mine."

Thereupon Vasco called his friends to him, and, motioning for silence, said:

"Our friend Noddy," he explained, "has just told me something."

"About a gold mine?" asked one of the men, bitterly.

"It may prove to be a gold mine," said Vasco. "But it concerns one of those across the river," and he nodded toward the other campers.

"Did you notice one of the boys"—Bilette went on—"the fat one; the stout youth; the one they call Bob and sometimes Chunky?"

"Si! Si!" exclaimed the Mexicans.

"Well, his father is a rich banker."

"What of it?" asked one of the men. "His money is not in Mexico."

"But it can be brought to Mexico!" cried Vasco.

"How?"

"By kidnapping the boy and holding him for a large ransom. Will you do it?"

"We will!" yelled the men. "This will provide us with gold. We'll kidnap the fat boy!"

CHAPTER XV.

CAUGHT BY AN ALLIGATOR.

"EASY! Easy!" cried Vasco Bilette. "Do you want them to hear you across the river?"

Under his caution the men subsided.

"We must follow them and watch our chance," spoke Noddy. "We'll demand a heavy ransom."

"*Si! Si!*" agreed the Mexicans.

"That's how we get square, Jack," whispered Noddy to his chum.

"You bet, Noddy; and get money, too!" said Pender.

"We'll all have to have a share," put in Dalsett. "I'm not here for my health."

"Me either," remarked Bill Berry. "I need cash as much as any one."

"We'll share the ransom money," said Vasco. "Now turn in, every one of you."

Soon the camp became quiet, the only sounds heard being the movements of animals in the forest, or, now and then, the splash of a fish in the river.

The sun was scarcely above the horizon the next

morning ere Vasco Bilette was astir. He took a position where he could watch the other camp, and saw the professor and the boys get their breakfast and start off.

"We'll give them about an hour's start," said Vasco to Noddy. "Then the men on horses will follow and you can come, about a mile behind, in the auto. At the first opportunity we'll capture this Bob Baker."

Meanwhile, Jerry and his companions were going along at a moderate pace. The weather was fine though hot, and the road fairly good. For perhaps twenty miles they puffed along, and then they came to another river.

"I hope this isn't any deeper than the other," said Jerry.

"I'll swim across," volunteered Ned.

His offer was accepted, and, stripping off his outer garments, he plunged into the water. Luckily, he found the stream was about as shallow as the first one the auto had forded. He reached the opposite bank and called over.

"Come on! Fetch my clothes with you; I'm not going to swim back."

Jerry started the machine down into the water. It went along all right until about half way across. Then there came a sudden swirl beneath the surface, a jar to the machine, and then the auto came to a stop.

"What's the matter?" cried Jerry. "Have we struck a snag?"

"Looks more like a snag had struck us," replied Bob, leaning over the rear seat and looking down into the water. "Something has hold of one of the back wheels."

"Nonsense!" exclaimed Jerry. "Do you suppose a fish would try to swallow an automobile, as the whale did Jonah?"

"Well, you can see for yourself," maintained Bob. "There's some kind of a fish, or beast, or bird, down under the water, making quite a fuss. It's so muddy I can't make out what it is."

Jerry climbed over into the tonneau. Sure enough, there was some disturbance going on. Every now and then the water would swirl and eddy, and the automobile would tremble as if trying to move against some powerful force. Jerry had thrown out the gears as soon as he felt an obstruction.

Professor Snodgrass was closely observing the water.

"What do you think it is?" asked Jerry.

"It might be that it is an eddy of the water about a sink-hole, or it may be, as Bob suggests, a big fish," replied the naturalist. "I never knew there were fish in these waters big enough to stop an auto, though."

"It may be a whole school of fishes," said Bob.

Just then there came a more violent agitation of the water, and the auto began to move backward slightly.

"Whatever it is, it seems bound to get us," Jerry remarked. "Wait until I see if I can't beat the fish or whatever it is."

He turned on more power and threw in the first speed gear. The auto shivered and trembled, and then moved ahead slightly. But the big fish, or whatever it was, with powerful strokes of its tail began a backward pull that neutralized the action of the automobile.

"I see what it is!" cried the professor.

"What?" asked Jerry.

"A big alligator! It has one wheel in its mouth and is trying to drag us back. Hand me a rifle!"

Jerry passed over a gun. The professor, who was a good shot, leaned down over the back of the tonneau. He could just make out the ugly head of the 'gator beneath the surface. In quick succession he sent three bullets from the magazine rifle into its brain.

There was a last dying struggle of the beast, the waters swirled in a whirlpool under the lashing of the powerful tail, and then the little waves became red with blood and the alligator ceased struggling.

Once more Jerry threw the gear into place, and

this time the machine went forward and reached the opposite bank.

"I thought you were never coming," observed Ned, who was shivering in his wet undergarments. "What did you stop for? To catch fish?"

"We stopped because we had to," replied Jerry, and he told Ned about the alligator.

"I thought you were shooting bullfrogs," observed the swimmer as he got out some dry clothing. "Say, if we told the folks at home that a Mexican alligator tried to chew up an automobile, I wonder what they'd say?"

"The beast must have been very hungry, or else have taken us for an enemy," remarked the professor. "I wish I could have saved him for a specimen. But I suppose it would have been a bother to carry around."

"I think it would," agreed Jerry. "But now we are safe, I must see if Mr. Alligator damaged the machine any."

He looked at the wheels where the saurian had taken hold, but beyond the marks of the teeth of the beast on the spokes and rim, no harm had been done.

"Are we ready to go on now?" asked the professor, when Ned had finished dressing.

"I'd like to take a dip in the river," said Bob. "It's hot and dusty on the road, and we may not get another chance."

"I think I'll go in, too," observed Jerry. "We are in no hurry. Will you come along, professor?"

"No; I'll watch you," said the naturalist. He sat down on the bank while Jerry and Chunky prepared for a dip.

They splashed around in the water near shore and had a good bath. Bob was swimming a little farther out than was Jerry.

"Better stay near shore," cautioned the professor. "No telling when some alligators may be along."

At that instant Bob gave a cry. He struggled in the water and gave a spring into the air.

"Something has stung me!" he cried.

Then he sank back, limp and unconscious, beneath the waves.

"Hurry!" cried the professor. "Get him out, Jerry, or he'll be drowned!"

But Jerry had hurried to the rescue even before the professor called. Reaching down under the water he picked up his companion's body, and, placing it over his shoulder, waded to shore with it. Bob was as limp as a rag.

"Is he killed?" asked Ned.

"I hope not," replied the professor. "Still, he had a narrow escape."

"Did something bite him?" asked Jerry.

The professor pointed to a small red mark on Bob's leg.

"He received an electric shock," said the naturalist.

"An electric shock?" echoed Ned.

"Yes; from the electric battery fish, or stinging ray, as they are sometimes called. They can give a severe shock, causing death under some circumstances, it is said. But I guess it was a young one that stung Bob. They are a fish," the professor went on to explain, "fitted by nature with a perfect electric battery. I wish I had caught one for a specimen."

"I didn't think of it at the time this one stung me or I would have caught it for you," said Bob, suddenly opening his eyes.

"Oh, you're better, are you?" asked Jerry.

"I'm all right," replied Bob. "It was quite a jar at first."

"I agree with you," put in the professor. "However, you got over it better than I expected you would. I think we had better get out of the neighborhood of this river. It seems unlucky."

In a little while Bob was sufficiently recovered to dress. Then, having delayed only to fill the water tank of the auto from the stream, the travelers resumed their journey.

They chugged along until nightfall, and having reached no settlement, they camped in the open, and made an early start the next day. It was about noon when, having made a sudden turn of the road,

they came to a place where there was a parting of the ways.

"I wonder which we shall take?" asked Ned.

"Look! Look!" cried Bob, suddenly, pointing to something ahead.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE LAUGHING SERPENT.

"WHAT is it?" asked Jerry, bringing the machine up with a sudden jerk.

"See! There is the laughing serpent!" exclaimed Bob.

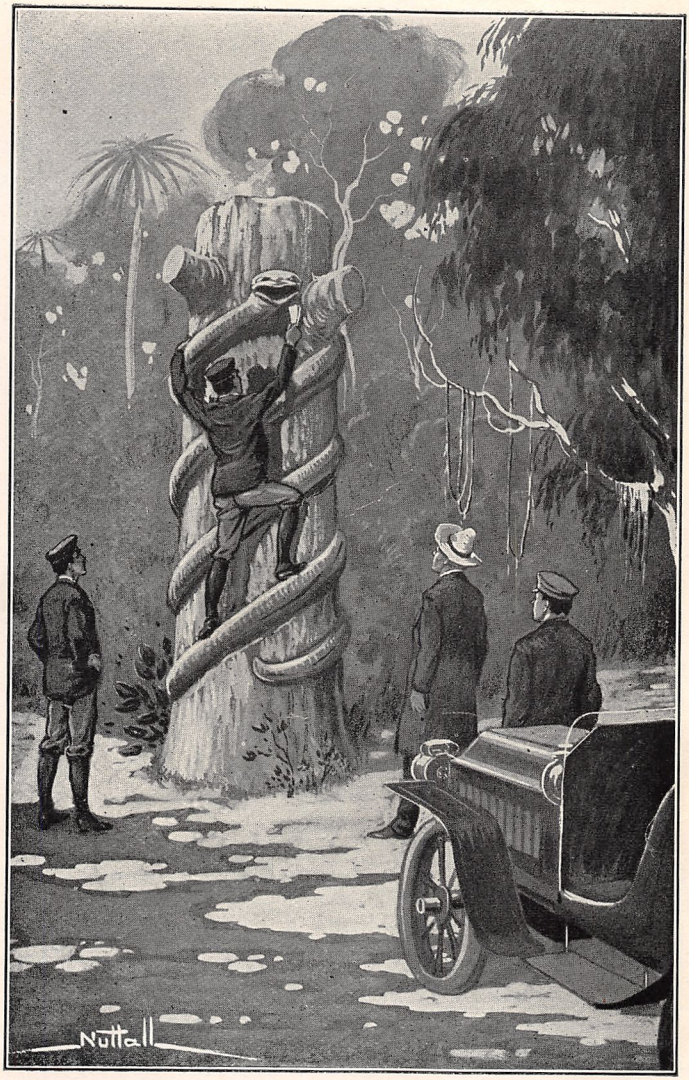
"The laughing serpent?" inquired Ned. "What do you mean?"

"Don't you remember what the old Mexican said?" went on Bob. "Here is the parting of the ways, and here is the image of the laughing serpent."

"Sure enough!" agreed the professor. "It's an image cut out of stone, in the shape of a snake laughing. Wonderful! Wonderful!"

Right at the fork of the road and about fifteen feet from the automobile was the strange design. It was rudely cut out of stone, a serpent twining about a tree-trunk. There was nothing remarkable in the image itself except for the quaint, laughing expression the sculptor had managed to carve on the mouth of the reptile.

"I wonder how it came here?" asked Jerry, get-



HE TOOK FROM THE MOUTH OF THE REPTILE A FOLDED PAGE.—*Page* 121.

ting out of the car and going close for a better look.

"Probably a relic of the Aztec race," replied the professor. "They were artists in their way. This must be the image the old Mexican mentioned. If it is I suppose we may as well follow his advice and take the road to the left."

"The road to the buried city," put in Jerry. "We must be close to it now."

"Isn't that something sticking in the mouth of the image?" asked Bob.

"It looks like a paper," said Ned. "I'll climb up and see what it is."

He scrambled up the stone tree-trunk, about which the image of the laughing serpent was twined. Reaching up, he took from the mouth of the reptile a folded paper.

"What does it say?" called Jerry.

"It's written in some queer language; Spanish, I guess," replied Ned. "I can't read it."

"Bring it here," said Professor Snodgrass. "Perhaps I can make it out."

The naturalist puzzled over the writing a few minutes. Then he exclaimed:

"It's from our old friend, the Mexican magician. He tells us to turn to the left, which is the same advice he has given us before, and he adds that we must beware of some sudden happening."

"I wonder what he means by that?" asked Jerry.

"Probably nothing," answered the professor. "But if something does happen, and he meets us after it, he'll be sure to say he warned us. It's a way those pretended wonder-workers have."

"How do you suppose the note was placed there?" inquired Bob. "We left the Mexican many miles behind."

"They are wonderful runners," answered the naturalist. "The magician may not have placed it here himself, but he may have given it to a friend. Perhaps there was a relay of runners, such as used to exist among the ancient Mexicans to carry royal messages. The old Mexican, who, somehow or other, discovered our object in this country, probably wanted to impress us with his abilities in the mystifying line."

The travelers spent a few minutes examining the queer, carved serpent. There were no other evidences of the existence of man at hand, and, except for the two roads, there was nothing to be seen but an almost unbroken forest. It was a wild part of Mexico.

"Well, what are we going to do?" asked Jerry. "Go on or stay here?"

"Go on, by all means," said the professor. "Why, we may be only a little way from the buried city! Just think of it! There will be wealth untold for us!"

"One thing puzzles me though" observed Bob.

"What is it, Chunky?" asked Ned.

"How are we going to know this buried city when we come to it?"

"How?" came from Jerry. "Why, I suppose there'll be a railroad station, with the name of the city on it. Or there may be trolley cars, so we can ask the conductors if we are at the underground town. Don't you worry about knowing the place when you get to it."

"But if it's underground, how are we going to find it?" persisted Bob. "It isn't like a mine, for people who know the signs can tell where gold or silver is hidden under the ground. But a city is different."

"I confess that question has been a puzzle to me," admitted Professor Snodgrass. "The only thing to do is to keep on along this road until we come to the place, or see some evidence that a buried city is in the vicinity."

"Forward, then!" cried Jerry, cranking up the auto.

They all got into the car and, proceeding at a slow speed, for the path was uncertain, started down the road leading to the left.

But all this while Noddy Nixon and Vasco Bilette, at the head of their two bands, had not been idle. Noddy kept his auto going, and Vasco and his Mexicans trotted along on horseback, drawing nearer and nearer to the travelers ahead of them.

It was about noon when the boys and the professor had started away from the image of the laughing serpent, and it was three hours later that Vasco and his men came up to it.

"Hello!" exclaimed the Mexican, staring at the carved stone. "I never saw you before, but you're not remarkable for beauty. I wonder what you're here for?"

He had never been in this part of Mexico before, and it was like a new country to him.

"I wonder which way those chaps took?" asked Vasco, dismounting from his horse. "It won't do for us to take the wrong trail."

"See!" exclaimed one of the Mexicans, pointing to where the tracks of the auto wheels could be seen, imprinted in the dust of the way leading to the left. "See! That way they go!"

"Sure enough they did, Petro!" remarked Vasco. "You have sharp eyes. Well, we'll just wait here until Noddy comes up and sees how things are. I shouldn't wonder but what it would be time to close in on 'em to-night. I'm getting tired of waiting. I want some money."

"So are we all tired!" exclaimed one of the gang, speaking in Spanish, which was the language Vasco always used save in talking to his English acquaintances. "We want gold, and if the fat boy is to be carried off and held for a ransom, the sooner the better."

"Have patience," advised Vasco. "We'll have him quick enough. Wait until Noddy comes." Then he began to roll a cigarette, his example being followed by all the others.

In about an hour Noddy, Pender, Dalsett and Berry came up in the auto. A consultation was held, and it was decided to have the horsemen follow the party in front more closely.

"We'll do the kidnapping to-night," said Noddy. "We'll wait until they go into camp, because that's what they'll have to do, for there are no inns down here. We'll be hiding in the bushes and at the proper time we'll grab Bob Baker and run."

"Good!" exclaimed Vasco. "My men were beginning to get impatient."

The plotters made a fire and prepared dinner. Then the Mexicans got out their revolvers and began cleaning them. Several also sharpened their knives.

"Look here," began Noddy, as he saw these preparations, "there's to be no killing, you know, Vasco."

"Killing! Bless you, of course not," was the reply, but Vasco winked one eye at Dalsett. "My men are only seeing that their weapons do not get rusty. Now, captain, we're ready to start as soon as you give the word."

"Then you may as well begin now," was Noddy's reply. "They have a pretty good start of us, but

we'll travel after dark, if need be, to catch up with them. As soon as they camp out for the night, Vasco, surround them so they can't escape. Then I'll come up in my car, and we'll take Bob away in it."

The horsemen started off, Noddy following in a little while. The trail made by the auto of the boys and the professor was easily followed.

Noddy's car had barely turned around a bend in the road before something strange happened. The laughing serpent seemed to tremble and shake. It appeared alive, and about to fall to the ground.

Then a portion of the base and tree-trunk slid to one side and from the interior, which was hollow, there stepped out an old Mexican—the same who had played the part of the magician and who had given prophetic warning to the travelers.

"Ha! My trick worked!" he exclaimed. "It was a hard journey to travel all that distance and get here ahead of them. Only the fleetness of my horse and the fact that I knew all the roads that were short cuts, enabled me to do it. Now for the final act in the game!"

He placed his fingers to his mouth and blew a shrill whistle. In an instant a milk-white horse came from the bushes, where it had been concealed.

"Here, my beauty!" called the Mexican.

He leaped on the animal's back and dashed off like the wind, down the road leading to the right.

CHAPTER XVII.

AN INTERRUPTED KIDNAPPING.

As the auto containing the naturalist and the boys progressed, the road became more and more difficult to travel. Part of the way was overgrown with brush, and several times the travelers had to stop, get out and cut big vines that grew across the path.

"I guess there hasn't been much going on along this highway," observed Jerry.

"And I don't believe it will ever be much in favor with autoists," said Ned. "There's too much sand."

There was a great deal of the fine dirt and in some places it was so soft and yielding that the wheels of the car sank down half way to the hubs, making it impossible to proceed except at a snail's pace. Then, again, would come firm stretches, where the going was easier.

In this manner several miles were traversed. The forest on either side of the road became more dense and wilder. Thousands of parrots and other

birds flew about among the trees, and troops of monkeys followed the progress of the automobile, chattering as if in rage at the invasion of their stamping ground.

Suddenly the screams and chattering of the monkeys ceased. The birds also stopped their racket, and the silence was weird after the riot of noise. Then there came such a series of shrill shrieks from a band of monkeys that it was evident something out of the ordinary had happened.

The next instant a long, lithe, yellow animal shot across the road in front of the auto. The big beast had a monkey in its mouth.

"A jaguar!" exclaimed the professor. "Quick, boys! Get the rifle!"

Ned handed the weapon to the professor, who fired three times, quickly, but the jaguar leaped on, unharmed.

"Well, we're getting into the region of big game," remarked the naturalist, "and we'll have to be on the lookout now or some of the beasts will be trying that trick on us."

"The monkeys must have seen him; that's why they kept so still that time," remarked Bob.

"But it didn't do that particular one any good," said the professor. "He must have been caught napping. Well, Mr. Jaguar will have a good supper to-night."

"That reminds me," spoke Bob. "When are we going to eat?"

"That's right, speak of eating and you'll be sure to hear from Chunky," said Jerry. "But I suppose we'll have to camp pretty soon. It's five o'clock and there don't seem to be any hotels in the vicinity," and he glanced at the dense forest on every side and grinned.

"We'll camp at the next clearing," said the professor. "Better get to a place where there's a little space on every side of you when there are wild animals about."

A mile further on the travelers came to a place where the trees were less thick. There was an open space on either side of the road. The auto was placed under the shelter of a wide-spreading palm and then the adventurers busied themselves getting supper.

The professor took a gun and went a little way into the woods. He shot a small deer, and in a little while some choice venison steaks were broiling over the camp stove.

"This is something like eating," remarked Ned. "I was getting tired of those frijoles, eggs and tortillas," and he accepted a second helping of venison.

The rubber and woolen blankets were taken from the auto, and the travelers prepared to spend the night in the forest.

"I guess we'll mount guard," said the professor. "The forest is full of jaguars. I saw three while I was hunting the deer."

"Let me stay up," begged Jerry. "I'm not sleepy, and I'd like to get a shot at one of the beasts."

Ned also wanted to remain up, but the professor said he could take the second watch; and, content with this, Ned turned in with the others.

As the night wore on the forests resounded more and more with the noises made by wild beasts. The howls of the foxes mingled with the more terrifying yells of the jaguars, and of the latter beasts the woods seemed to be full.

Jerry, with the loaded magazine rifle, was on the alert. He kept up a bright fire, for he knew that unless made desperate by hunger no wild thing would approach a flame. There were queer rustlings and cracklings of the underbrush on every side of the sentinel. Now and then through the leaves he caught glimpses of reddish-green eyes reflecting back the shine of the blaze.

Following the plans they had made, Vasco Bilette and his Mexicans, together with Noddy and the crowd in the automobile, had trailed the boys and the professor to the camp. With great caution, Vasco had led his men to within a short distance of the fire Jerry had kindled, and Noddy's auto was in readiness for the kidnapping.

So, though Jerry did not know it, there were the eyes of dangerous men on his movements as well as the eyes of dangerous beasts.

Like dark shadows, the Mexicans slowly encircled the camp. They were so close they could distinguish the sleeping forms.

"Which is Bob?" whispered Vasco to Noddy.

"That one right at the foot of the big palm tree," replied Noddy Nixon, pointing out the banker's son.

"Is everything ready?" the leader of the Mexicans asked.

"All ready!" replied Noddy.

Vasco was about to steal forward, hoping to be able to grab up Bob and make off with him before the camp was aroused. In case of resistance, he had given his men orders to shoot.

But at that instant a big jaguar, driven wild with hunger, and braving all danger, had crept to within a few feet of Jerry. The animal smelled the meat of the recently killed deer, the carcass of which hung in a tree. The fierce beast determined to get a meal at all hazards. It crouched on the limb of a tree, just above Jerry's head, ready for a spring at the body of the deer.

Jerry happened to glance up. He saw the long, lithe body, tense for a leap, the reddish-green eyes glaring at him. Jerry was not a coward, but the sight of the brute, so dangerous and so close to

him, scared him greatly for a second or two. Then, recovering his nerve, he raised the rifle, took quick aim and fired three shots in rapid succession.

With a snarl and roar the jaguar toppled to the ground, tearing up the earth and leaves in a death struggle.

"What's the matter?" called out the professor.

"Are you hurt, Jerry?" cried Ned.

Bob, too, roused up, and the whole camp was soon astir, every one grabbing a gun or revolver. Jerry fired two more shots into the jaguar, and the struggles ceased.

"I got him just in time," he remarked.

The others crowded around the brute.

"Halt!" exclaimed Bilette, under his breath, as, ready with his men to rush on the camp, he saw that his plan was spoiled. "If it had not been for that jaguar I would have had the captive. Come, we must get out of this!"

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE UNDERGROUND CITY.

VASCO BILETTE'S warning was received with ill humor by his men. They were angry because the kidnapping had not succeeded, and because the jaguar had alarmed the camp and put every one on guard.

"Come, let us give them battle now and take the boy!" suggested one.

"Do you want to be killed?" asked Vasco, angrily. "They are all armed now, and would shoot at the least suspicious sound. I, for one, don't care to have a bullet in me. Come, let us get out of this."

The Mexicans saw the force of Vasco's arguments. They did not care about being shot at like wild beasts, and they knew that the boys and the professor were ready for anything now.

"We will try to-morrow night," said Bilette, as, with Noddy and his men, he silently withdrew to where the horses and auto had been left. "Perhaps we'll have better luck then."

The men growled, but had to accept the situa-

tion. As for our friends, they were too excited to sleep any more that night, and so they sat around the camp-fire and talked until morning.

Breakfast over, camp was broken, and once more the auto started on the trip toward the hidden city. Professor Snodgrass got out the map made by his dead friend and studied it carefully.

"I believe we are on the right road," the naturalist said. "Here is a highway marked on the drawing that seems to correspond with the one we are on. And there is a place marked where two roads diverge. Only there is nothing said about the laughing serpent, though there is something here that might be taken for it," and he pointed to the map.

Every one was becoming quite anxious, and the boys, as well as the professor, kept close watch on each foot of the way to see if there were any indications that they were close to the underground town.

They stopped for dinner near a little brook, in which Bob caught several fish that made a welcome addition to the bill of fare.

"Now, if you boys don't object, I think I'll take a little stroll into the woods and see what I can find in the way of specimens," remarked the naturalist, as he finished the last of his fish and frijoles.

"Better take a gun along," called Ned. "A jaguar may get you."

"I'm not going very far," replied the professor. "All I want is my net and box," and with these only he started off.

It was about an hour later when Jerry observed:

"Doesn't it seem as if the monkeys were making more noise than usual?"

The boys listened for a few seconds. It was evident that something had disturbed these nimble inhabitants of the forest, for they were yelling and chattering at a great rate.

"Maybe another jaguar is after them," suggested Bob.

"No; it doesn't sound like that," said Jerry. "They seem to be yelling more in rage than in fear."

"Maybe they're having a fight," put in Ned.

Just then there came a crashing, as if several trees were being crashed down by a tornado. There was a crackling of the underbrush and a rustling in the leaves. Then, above this noise and the yells of the monkeys, sounded a single cry:

"Help, boys!"

"The professor's in trouble again!" cried Jerry. "I wonder what it is this time?"

Grabbing up a rifle, which example Bob and Ned imitated, Jerry ran in the direction of the voice. The noise made by the monkeys increased, and there were sounds as if a bombardment of the forest was under way.

"Where are you?" called Jerry. "We are coming!"

"Under this big rock!" called the professor, and the boys, looking in the direction his voice came from, saw the naturalist hiding under a big ledge of stone that jutted out of the side of a hill in a sort of a clearing.

"Can't you come out?" called Ned.

"I tried to several times, but I was nearly killed," replied the professor. "The monkeys are after me. Look at the ground."

The boys looked and saw, strewn in front of the shallow cave in which the professor had ensconced himself, a number of round, dark objects. As they looked there came a shower of others through the air. Several of them hit on the rock, broke, and a shower of white scattered all about.

"What in the world are they?" asked Bob.

He ran toward the professor. No sooner had he emerged out of the dense forest into the clearing than a regular hail of the round objects fell all about him. One struck him on the shoulder and the boy was glad enough to retreat.

"What's it all about?" asked Ned.

"The monkeys are bombarding the professor with cocoanuts," said Bob, gasping for breath after his run.

"Cocoanuts?"

"That's what they are. Here come some more."

He had scarcely spoken before the air was again dark with the brown nuts, which were much larger than those seen in market, being contained in their original husk. At the same time there was a chorus of angry cries from the monkeys.

It was evident now why the professor dared not leave his rock shelter. The minute he did so he would run the risk of being struck down and probably killed by a volley of the nuts. Nor could the boys go to his rescue, for the moment they crossed the clearing they would be targets for the infuriated animals.

"What's to be done?" asked Ned.

"Supposing we shoot some of the monkeys," suggested Bob.

"I don't think that would be a good idea," said Jerry. "In the first place if we kill any of the animals it will make the others all the angrier. And then we would have to keep shooting for several days to make much of an inroad on the beasts. There must be five thousand of them."

Indeed, the forest was full of the long-tailed and nimble-fingered monkeys, all perched in cocoanut or other trees, ready to resent the slightest movement on the part of their human enemies.

"I know a good trick," spoke Bob.

"What is it, Chunky?" asked Jerry.

"Take a big looking-glass and put it on a tree. The monkeys will be attracted by the shine of it;

they will all go down to see what it is and when they see a strange monkey in the glass they will fight. That will make enough fuss so that the professor can escape."

"That might be a good trick if we had the big mirror, which we haven't," spoke Jerry. "You'll have to think of something else, Chunky."

But there was no need of this, for at that instant the cries of the monkeys ceased. The silence was almost oppressive in its suddenness and by contrast with the previous riot of noise. Then came unmistakable screams of fear from the simians.

"Now what has happened, I wonder?" said Ned.

"It's a jaguar!" cried Bob.

He pointed to a tree, on a limb of which one of the animals the monkeys dreaded so much was stretched out. The beast was stalking one of the chattering animals, but his presence had been discovered by the whole tribe.

So much in awe did the monkeys hold this scourge of the Mexican forests that his presence accomplished what the boys could never hope to. The apes trooped off with a rush, chattering in fright. With a howl of rage the jaguar took after them.

"You can come out now, Professor," called Ned. "The monkeys are gone."

In fear and trembling the naturalist came from

his sheltering rock. He seemed in momentary fear lest he might be greeted with a shower of the nuts, but none fell. With rapid strides he crossed the clearing and joined the boys.

"How did it all happen?" asked Jerry, as soon as the professor had recovered his breath.

"It was all my fault," explained the naturalist. "I was collecting some butterfly specimens, when I happened to see some monkeys in the cocoanut trees. I had read that if any one threw something at the beasts they would retaliate by throwing down cocoanuts. I wanted to test it, so I threw a few stones at the monkeys. They returned my fire with interest, so I was forced to run under the rock for shelter.

"There were only a few monkeys at first, but more came until there were thousands. They kept throwing cocoanuts until the ground was covered. It's lucky you came when I called."

"It's luckier the jaguar came along when he did," said Jerry.

"Let's get back to the auto before I get into any more trouble," suggested the professor. "I do seem to have the worst luck of getting into scrapes."

Half an hour later the travelers were on their way. It was getting well along into afternoon and they were beginning to think of where they would spend the night.

They were getting deeper and deeper into the forest, and the way became more and more difficult to travel. But they would not turn back, for they felt they were on the right path.

At length they came to a place where creepers and vines were so closely grown across the path that nothing short of hatchets could make a way. The boys got out the small axes kept for such emergencies, and, after an hour's work, made a passage.

They started forward once more, and were going along at a pretty good clip, the road having improved in spots.

"I wonder when we'll get to that underground city?" said Ned, for perhaps the tenth time that day.

He had no sooner spoken than the earth trembled under the auto. The machine seemed to stand still. Then, with a sickening motion it plunged forward and downward.

A big hole had opened in the road and let the car and its occupants through the surface of the earth. The machine slid forward, revealing, near the top of a shaft, a brief glimpse of several ruined buildings.

"It is the underground city!" exclaimed the professor.

Then there came intense darkness.

CHAPTER XIX.

IN AN ANCIENT TEMPLE.

THE auto seemed to be bumping along downhill, for at the first evidence of danger Jerry had shut off the power and applied the brake. But the descent was too steep to have the bands hold.

Down and down the adventurers went, through some underground passage, it was evident.

"Are we all here?" called Jerry, his voice sounding strange and muffled in the chamber to which they had come.

"I'm here and all right, but I don't exactly know what has happened," replied the professor.

"The same with me," put in Ned, and Bob echoed his words.

Just then the automobile came to a stop, having reached a level and run along it for a short distance.

"Well, we seem to have arrived," went on Jerry. "I wonder how much good it is going to do us?"

"Supposing we light the search-lamp and see what sort of a place we are in," suggested Professor Snodgrass. "It's so dark in here we might

just as well be inside one of the pyramids of Egypt."

The acetylene gas lamp on the front of the auto was lighted, and in its brilliant rays the travelers saw that they were in a large underground passage. It was about twenty feet high, twice as broad and seemed to be hewn out of solid rock.

"This is what makes it so dark," observed the professor. "I knew it must be something like this, for it was still daylight when we tumbled into the hole and we haven't been five minutes down here. Run the auto forward, Jerry."

The car puffed slowly along surely as strange a place as ever an automobile was in. The boys looked eagerly ahead. They saw nothing but the rocky sides and roof of the passage.

"This doesn't look much like an underground city," objected Ned. "I think it's an abandoned railway tunnel."

At that instant Jerry shut off the power and applied the brakes with a jerk.

"What's the matter?" asked the professor.

"There's some sort of a wall or obstruction ahead," was the answer, and Jerry pointed to where, in the glare of the lamp, could be seen a wall that closed up the passageway completely.

"I guess this is the end," remarked Ned, ruefully.

The naturalist got out of the car and ran for-

ward. He seemed to be examining the obstruction carefully. He struck it two or three blows.

"Hurrah!" he cried. "Come on, boys, this is only a big wooden door! We can open it!"

In an instant the three lads had joined him. They found that the passage was closed by a big portal of planks, bolted together and swinging on immense hinges. There was also a huge lock or fastening.

"Can we open the door?" inquired Bob. "It looks as if it was meant to stay shut."

"We'll soon see," answered Jerry.

He ran back to the automobile and got a kit of tools. Then, while Ned held up one of the small oil lamps that was taken off the dashboard of the car, Jerry tackled the lock. It was a massive affair, but time had so rusted it that very little trouble was found in taking it apart so that the door was free.

"Everybody push, now!" called Jerry. "Those hinges are pretty rusty."

They shoved with all their strength, but the door, though it gave slightly, showing that no more locks held it, would not open. It had probably not been used for centuries.

"Looks as if we'd have to stay here," said the professor.

"Not a bit of it," spoke Jerry. "Wait a minute."

He ran back to the auto, and soon the others heard him cranking it up.

"Look out! Stand to one side!" he called.

The auto came forward slowly. Jerry steered the front part of it carefully against the massive door. Once he was close to the portal he turned on full power.

There was a cracking and splintering of wood, and a squeaking as the rusty hinges gave. Then, with the auto pushing against it, the massive door swung to one side. The machine had accomplished what the strength of the boys and the professor could not.

Slowly but surely the portal opened. Wider and wider it swung, until there burst on the astonished gaze of the travelers a flood of light. The sun was shining overhead, though fast declining in the west, but in the bright glare of the slanting beams there was revealed the underground city.

There it stood in all its ancient splendor, most of it, however, but mere ruins of what had been fine buildings. There were rows and rows of houses, stone palaces and what had been beautiful temples. Nearly all of the structures showed traces of elaborate carvings.

But ruin was on every side. The roofs of houses, temples and palaces had fallen in. Walls were crumbling and the streets were filled with debris. As the boys looked, some foxes scampered among the ruins, and shortly afterward a jaguar slunk along, crawling into a hole in a temple wall.

"Grand! Beautiful! Solemn!" exclaimed the professor, in raptures over the discovery. "It is more than I dared to hope for. Think of it, boys! We have at last discovered the buried city of ancient Mexico. How the people back in civilization will open their eyes when they hear this news! My name and yours as well will be covered with glory. Oh, it is marvelous!"

"I guess it will be some time before the people back in Cresville hear of this," observed Jerry. "There doesn't seem to be any way of sending a letter from here. I don't see any telegraph station, and there's not a messenger boy in sight."

"That's funny," said Ned. "You'd think a buried city, a dead one, so to speak, would be just the place where a district messenger would like to come to rest."

"It's a lonesome place here," remarked Bob. "I hope we'll find some one to talk to."

"That's just the beauty of the place," said the professor. "What good would an ancient, ruined, buried city be if people were living in it? I hope there isn't a soul here but ourselves."

"I guess you'll get your desire, all right," remarked Jerry.

The first surprise and wonder over, the travelers advanced a little way into the city and looked about them. They saw that the place, which was several miles square, was down in a hollow, formed

of high hills. For this reason the location of the city had remained so long a secret. They had come upon it through one of the underground passages leading into the town, and these, as they afterward learned, were the only means of entering the place. There were four of these passages or tunnels, one entering from each side of the city, north, south, east and west.

But time and change had closed up the outer ends of the tunnels after the city had become deserted, and it remained for Professor Snodgrass and his party to tumble in on one.

It was as if a city had been built inside an immense bowl and on the bottom of it. The sides of the bowl would represent the hills and mountains that girt the ancient town. Then, if four holes were made in the sides of the vessel, close to the bottom, they would be like the four entrances to the old city.

"Supposing we take a ride through the town before dark," suggested Jerry. "We may meet some one."

He started the machine, but after going a short distance it was found that it was impracticable to use the machine to any advantage. The streets were filled with debris and big stones from the ruined houses and fallen hills, and it needed constant twisting and turning to make the journey.

"Let's get out and walk," proposed Ned.

"Then there's a good place to leave the machine," said Bob, pointing to a ruined temple on the left. "We can run it right inside, through the big doors. It's a regular garage."

The suggestion was voted a good one, and Jerry steered the auto into the temple. The place had been magnificent in its day. Even now the walls were covered with beautiful paintings, or the remains of them, and the whole interior and exterior of the place was a mass of fine stone carving.

The roof had fallen away in several places, but there were spots where enough remained to give shelter. The machine was run into a covered corner and then the travelers went outside.

The professor uttered cries of delight at every step, as he discovered some new specimen or relic. They seemed to exist on every side.

"Look out where you're stepping!" called the naturalist, suddenly, as Jerry was about to set his foot down.

"What's the matter—a snake?" asked the boy, jumping back.

"No. But you nearly stepped on and ruined a petrified bug worth thousands of dollars!"

"Great Scott! I'll be careful after this," promised Jerry, as the professor picked up the specimen of a beetle and put it in his box.

CHAPTER XX.

MYSTERIOUS HAPPENINGS.

THE travelers strolled for some time longer, the professor finding what he called rare relics at every turn.

"This is like another gold mine," he said. "There are treasures untold here. I have no doubt we will find a store of diamonds and other precious stones before we are through."

"I'd like to find a ham sandwich right now," observed Bob.

"It wouldn't be Chunky if he wasn't hungry," laughed Ned. "But I admit I feel somewhat the same way myself."

"Then we had better go back to the temple and get supper," advised Jerry.

So back they went, but their progress was slow, because the professor would insist on examining every bit of ruins he came to in order to see if there were not specimens to be gathered or relics to be picked up. His green box was full to overflowing and all his pockets bulged, but he was the happiest of naturalists.

It was dark when they reached the ancient place of worship where the auto had been left, and at Jerry's suggestion Bob lighted the search-lamp and the other two lights on the machine. This made a brilliant circle of illumination in one place, but threw the rest of the temple into a dense blackness.

"I wouldn't want to be here all alone," remarked Bob, looking about and shuddering a bit.

"Why, Chunky? Afraid of ghosts?" asked Ned.

"What was that?" exclaimed Bob, suddenly, starting at a noise.

"A bat," replied the naturalist. "The place is full of them. I must get some for specimens."

"I don't know but what I prefer ghosts to bats," said Bob. "I hope none of them suck our blood while we're asleep."

"No danger; I guess none of these are of the vampire variety," remarked the professor. "But now let's get supper."

In spite of the strangeness of the surroundings, the travelers managed to make a good meal. The gasolene stove was set up and some canned chicken prepared, with tortillas and frijoles.

"We'll have to replenish our larder soon," remarked Jerry, looking into the provision chest. "There's only a little stuff left."

"We'll have to go hunting some day," said the

professor. "We can't starve in this country. Game is too plentiful."

"I wonder if the people who built this place didn't put some bedrooms in it," said Bob, as, sitting on the floor of the temple, he began to nod from sleepiness.

"Perhaps they did," put in Ned. "Let's take a look."

He unfastened one of the oil lamps from the auto and started off on an exploring trip. A little to the left of the corner where the auto stood he came to a door. Though it worked hard on the rusted hinges he managed to push it open. He flashed the light inside.

"Hurrah! Here are some beds or couches or something of the kind!" he shouted.

The others came hurrying up. The room seemed to be a sort of resting place for the priests of the ancient temple. Ranged about the side walls were wooden frames on which were stretched skins and hides of animals, in a manner somewhat as the modern cot is made.

"I wonder if they are strong enough to hold us," said Jerry.

"Let Chunky try, he's the heaviest," suggested Ned.

Accordingly, Bob stretched out on the ancient bed. It creaked a little, but showed no signs of

collapsing in spite of the many years it had been in the place.

"This will be better than sleeping on a cold stone floor," remarked the professor. "Fetch in the blankets and we'll have a good night's rest."

"Shall we post a guard?" asked Jerry.

"I don't think it will be necessary," replied the naturalist. "I hardly believe there is any one in this old city but ourselves, and we can barricade the door to keep out any stray animals."

So, in a little while, the travelers were all slumbering. But the professor was wrong in his surmise that they were the only inhabitants of the underground city. No sooner had a series of snores proclaimed that every one was sleeping than from a dark recess on the opposite side of the temple to that where the automobile stood there came a strange figure, clad in white. If Bob had seen it he surely would have said it was a ghost.

"So you found my ancient city after all," whispered the figure. "You know now that the Mexican magician was telling the truth, and you realize that you found the place sooner than you expected, and in a strange manner. But there will be more strange things happen before you go from here, I promise you."

"Are the *Americano* dogs asleep?" sounded a whisper from the recess whence came the aged

Mexican, who had so strangely prophesied to the professor.

"Yes, San Lucia, they are asleep," replied the first figure, as another, attired as he was, joined him. "But speak softly, for they have sharp ears and wake easily."

"Have they the gold with them?" asked San Lucia, who was also quite old. "That is what we want, Murado. Have they the gold?"

"All *Americanos* have gold," replied Murado. "That is why I lured them on. All my plans were made to get them here that we might take their gold."

"And you succeeded wonderfully well, Murado. Tell me about it, for I have not had a chance to talk to you since you arrived in such breathless haste."

"There is not much to tell," replied the other. "I heard of their arrival in a short time after they reached Mexico. Then, in a secret way, I heard what they were searching for. Chance made it possible for me to somewhat startle them by pretending to know more than I did. I met them on the road and told them of what they were in search and how to find it."

"That was easy, since you knew so well yourself," interrupted San Lucia. "We have not been brigands for nothing, Murado. Well do I remember the day you and I came upon this buried

city. And it has been our headquarters ever since."

"As I said, it was easy to mystify them," went on Murado. "They traveled fast in their steam wagon, or whatever it is, but I knew several short cuts that enabled me to get ahead of them. I was hidden in the hollow stone image of the laughing serpent and saw, through the little eye-holes, how they came up and took the paper I had written and put between the lips of the reptile. Oh, it all worked out as I had planned, and now we have them here where we want them."

"And we will kill them and get their gold!" whispered San Lucia, feeling of a knife he wore in his belt. "But tell me, how did they happen to stumble on the right underground passage?"

"They didn't happen to," replied Murado. "That was one point where I failed. But it is just as well. You see, I had so managed things that I knew they would take the road to the left of the image. When I saw them depart I called my horse and galloped off to the right. I wanted to take a short cut and get here ahead of them.

"I succeeded. You were away; just when I needed your help, too. But I managed. I went out in the underground passage and waited for them.

"That passage, you know, goes right under the road they were traveling on. Whoever built this ancient city must have wanted it to remain hidden,

for the only way to get to it is by the tunnels. If, by chance, some one approached on the roads leading to the top of the mountains the ancients had a plan to get rid of them."

"How?" asked San Lucia.

"At several places in the upper roadway there were false places. That is, they were traps. A portion of the road would be dug away, making a shaft down to the tunnel. Then boards would be placed over the hole and a light covering of dirt sprinkled on the planks. Watchers were stationed below, and at the sound of an enemy on the boards above the sentinels would pull a lever. This would take away the supports of the false portion of the road, and it would crash down into the tunnel, carrying the enemy with it.

"So I played the part of the watcher, and when I heard the *Americanos* riding over the trap I pulled the lever and down they crashed.

"There, as I said, I made my only mistake. I expected the *Americanos* would be killed, but their steam cart is strong, and the fall did not hurt them. Besides, only one end of the trap gave way, and the other, holding fast, made an inclined road on which they descended into the tunnel. That is how they came here, and now we must to work if we are to get their gold."

"And quickly, too," observed Sam Lucia, "for I learned that another party is following this; they,

too, have a steam wagon, and we may trap them also."

"I know the crowd of whom you speak," said Murado. "They are not far behind. One is a youth called Nixy Nodnot, or some barbarous thing like it. They will be surprised not to find their friends. But come, they sleep!"

Then the two Mexican brigands began creeping toward the room where the professor and the boys were sleeping.

CHAPTER XXI.

NODDY HAS A TUMBLE.

WHEN Vasco and Noddy, foiled in their attempt to kidnap Bob, retreated through the forest, they went into camp with their crowd in no very pleasant frame of mind. The Mexicans whom Vasco had hired to assist him were angry at being foiled, and they talked of deserting.

"Go on, if you want to," said Vasco, carelessly rolling a cigarette; "so much the more gold for us when the rich man ransoms his son."

This was enough to excite the greed of the men, who talked no more of going away.

The next day, after a consultation, Noddy and Vasco decided to continue on the trail of the boys and the professor. They pursued the same tactics they had previous to the interrupted kidnapping, and were careful not to get too close to those they were trailing.

All was not harmonious among the members of the band with which Noddy had surrounded himself. The men had frequent quarrels, especially

when they were playing cards, which they seemed to do when they were not smoking cigarettes.

After dinner one day the Mexicans appeared to be much amused as they played their game. They laughed and shouted and seemed to be talking of the automobile, for Noddy had brought his machine up to the camp of the horsemen.

"What are they talking about?" asked Noddy of Vasco.

"They are making a wager that the one who loses the game must ride, all by himself, in the automobile," replied Bilette.

"But I don't want them to do that," said Noddy. "They don't know how to run the car."

"That's the trouble," went on Vasco. "No one wants to lose, for they're all afraid to operate the machine. But if one of them tries to do it, you'd better let him, if you don't want to get into trouble."

With a shout of laughter the men arose from where they had been playing the game. They seemed to be railing at one chap, who looked at the auto as if he feared it might blow up and kill him.

"You're in for it," remarked Vasco. "Whatever you do don't make a fuss."

With a somewhat sheepish air a young Mexican, one of Vasco's crowd, came near the auto. He made a sign that he wanted to take Noddy's place.

The latter frowned and spoke in English, only a word or two of which the native understood.

"You shan't have this machine," spoke Noddy. "It's mine, and if you try to run it you'll break it."

But the Mexican paid no heed. He came close up to Noddy, grabbed him by the collar and hauled him from the car. Noddy was the only one in it at that time, Berry, Dalsett and Pender having gone off a short distance.

"Let go of me!" cried Noddy, trying to draw a small revolver he carried.

The Mexican only grunted and retained his grip.

"If you don't let me alone I'll fire!" exclaimed the youth. He had his revolver out, and the Mexican, seeing this, allowed his temper to cool a bit. But there was an angry look in his eyes that meant trouble for Noddy.

"Now you fellows quit this gambling," commanded Vasco. "We'll have hard work ahead of us in a little while, and we don't want any foolishness. Leave Noddy alone. Don't you know if any one tries to run that machine that hasn't been introduced to it, the engine will blow up!"

"Diablo!" exclaimed the Mexican who had lost at cards and who was about to attempt to operate the auto. "I will let it alone!"

Quiet was restored, but the bad feeling was only smoothed over. It was liable to break out again at any time. The main object of the crowd was

not lost sight of, however, and every hour they drew nearer the trail of those of whom they were in pursuit.

As it grew dusk, on the day of the quarrel over the auto, Noddy and Vasco, with their followers, came to a small clearing. They decided to stop and have supper.

"If I'm not mistaken, the other auto has been here within a short time," remarked Vasco, pointing to marks in the sandy road. "And there seem to be footprints leading over there through the underbrush."

He followed the trail, and came to the place where, a short time before, Professor Snodgrass had battled with the cocoanut-throwing monkeys.

"Looks as if some one was going to start in the wholesale business," went on the Mexican, glancing at the pile of nuts the simians had piled up.

"Do you think we are close to them?" asked Noddy, for, since the experience of the afternoon, he was anxious to get the kidnapping over, and be rid of the Mexicans.

"They have been here very recently," said Vasco.

"How can you tell?" asked Noddy.

"See where the oil has dripped from their machine," replied Bilette, pointing to a little puddle of the lubricant in the road. "It has not yet had time to soak away, showing that it must have been

there but a short time, since in this sand it would not remain long on top."

"Shall we go on after them or camp for the night?" asked Noddy, following a somewhat lengthy pause.

"Keep on," replied Vasco. "No telling when we may get another chance. Get the boy when we can. We'll have to do a little night traveling, but what of it?"

Noddy assented. He spent some time after supper in oiling up the auto and getting the lamps filled, for darkness was coming on. Then, all being in readiness, Noddy started off, the horsemen keeping close to him.

For a few miles no one in the party spoke. The auto puffed slowly along, the horsemen managing to keep up to it.

"How do we know we're on the right road?" asked Noddy at length. "We may have gone astray in the darkness."

Tom Dalsett took a lantern and made a careful survey of the highway. He came back presently.

"We're all right," he said. "There are auto tracks just ahead of us. We may come up to them any minute now."

Once more Noddy's auto, which he had stopped to let Dalsett out, started up. The pace was swift and silent. But as they penetrated farther and farther into the depths of the forest there was no sign

of the boys and the professor, who, by this time, were in the underground city.

"I don't believe we'll find them," spoke Jack Pender. "Let's camp now and take up the trail in the morning, when you can see better."

"No; we must keep on," said Vasco, firmly. "It is to-night or never. I can't hold my men together any longer than that."

Off into the darkness puffed the auto. The men on horseback followed it, the whole party keeping close together, for several jaguars were seen near the path, having been driven from their usual haunts because of the scarcity of game.

Every one was on the alert, watching for any signs of the travelers they were pursuing. Every now and then some one would get out and examine the road to see if the auto marks were still to be seen. They were there, and led straight on to the hidden city.

It was some time past midnight and the machine was going over a good patch of road, when Jack Pender, who was seated beside Noddy, suddenly grabbed the steersman's arm.

"What's that ahead in the road?" asked Jack.

"I don't see anything," replied Noddy. "It's your imagination. What does it look like?"

"Like a big black shadow, bigger and blacker than any around here. Can't you see it now? There it is! Stop the machine, quick!"

Noddy, peering through the gloom, saw what seemed to be a patch of shadows. He gave the levers quick yanks, jammed down the brakes and tried to bring the machine to a stop.

But he was too late. With a plunge the car sank through the earth and rushed along the inclined plane down which Jerry and his friends had coasted a few hours before. There were wild cries of fear, mingled with the shrill neighing of horses, for some of the riders and their steeds also went down the trap that had been laid.

The auto remained upright and shot along the floor of the tunnel to which it had fallen, undergoing the same experience as had the machine of Jerry and his friends.

Then, with a crash that resounded through the confines of the ancient city, Noddy and his machine and all who were in it brought up against the massive door closing the tunnel, which portal Jerry had swung shut after he and his friends had passed through. Following the crash there came an ominous silence.

CHAPTER XXII.

FACE TO FACE.

"HARK! What was that?" whispered San Lucia to Murado.

The two old brigands paused in their stealthy march upon their sleeping victims, as the sound of the crash Noddy's auto made came faintly to their ears.

"How should I know?" asked Murado, but he seemed alarmed.

"It sounded in the tunnel," went on San Lucia. "Some one is coming! Quick! Let us hide! Another night will do for our work."

Thereupon the two old villains, alarmed by the terror of the noise caused by they knew not what, hesitated and then fled as silently as they had advanced. For the time the lives of the boys and the professor had been saved.

San Lucia and Murado went to their hiding place in the old temple, the building being so large and rambling that it would have hidden a score of men with ease. It may be added here that they

did not dare to touch many things in the ancient city, thinking them bewitched.

All unmindful of the danger which had menaced them, our travelers slept on, nothing disturbing them, and they did not hear the noise made by Noddy's tumble, though they were not far from the mouth of the tunnel.

"I say!" called Bob, sitting up and looking at his watch in a sunbeam that came through a broken window. "I say, are you fellows going to sleep all day? It's nearly eight o'clock, and I want some breakfast."

"Oh, of course it's something to eat as soon as you open your eyes!" exclaimed Jerry. "I should think you would take something to bed with you, Chunky, and put it under your pillow so you could eat in the night whenever you felt hungry."

"That's all right," snapped Bob, "but I notice we don't have to call you twice to come to your meals."

"Is it morning?" called the professor from his cot.

"Long ago," replied Bob, who was dressing. "I wonder if the folks that lived in this temple ever washed. I'd like to strike a bathroom about now."

"Hark! I hear something!" exclaimed the professor.

They all listened intently.

"It's running water," said the naturalist, "and

close by. Perhaps there's a wash-room in this temple."

"I'm going to see what's behind this door," said Bob, pointing to a portal none of them had noticed in the darkness. He pushed it open and went inside. The next instant he uttered a joyful cry:

"Come here, fellows! It's a plunge bath!"

Then they heard him spring in and splash about. Jerry and Ned soon followed, and the professor came a little later. It was a regular swimming-tank, stone-lined and sunk into the floor. The water came in through a sort of stone trough.

"These old chaps knew something about life, after all," observed Ned, as he climbed out and proceeded to dry himself.

"They were probably a bit like the Romans," remarked the professor, "and fond of bathing. But something has given me an appetite, and I wouldn't object to breakfast."

The others were of the same mind, and soon Ned had the gasolene stove set up and was preparing a meal. Bob attended to the brewing of the coffee instead of chocolate, and the aroma of the beverage filled the old temple with an appetizing odor.

"What are we going to do to-day?" asked Jerry, when they had finished the meal and were sitting comfortably on some low stools that had been discovered in the room where they slept.

"We must explore the city in all directions," said the professor. "There are many marvelous things here, and I have not begun to find them yet. It will take weeks and weeks."

"Are we going to stay here all that while?" asked Bob, somewhat dubiously.

"I'd like to," answered the naturalist. "But we can get a good load of specimens and relics, run up north and come back for more. This place is a regular treasure-trove."

Clearing away the remains of the breakfast, and looking over the auto to see that it had suffered no damage in the recent experience, the boys and the professor left the temple and strolled out into the deserted city. They did not know that their every movement was watched by the glittering eyes of San Lucia and Murado, who were hidden in an upper part of the temple whence they could look down on their intended victims from a small, concealed gallery.

By full daylight the ancient city was even more wonderful than it had appeared in the waning light of the previous afternoon. In the days of its glory it was evident it had been a beautiful place.

The travelers entered some of the better-preserved houses. They found the rooms filled with fine furniture, of a rude but simple and pleasing character, some of the articles being well preserved.

One house they visited seemed to have belonged

to some rich man, for it was filled with things that once had been of great beauty.

"There is something that should interest me!" exclaimed the professor, as he caught sight of a small cabinet on the wall. "That must contain curios."

He found his supposition right, and fairly reveled in the objects that were treasures to him, but not worth much to any one else. There were ancient coins, rings and other articles of jewelry and hundreds of bugs, beetles and minerals.

"Whoever lived here was a wise and learned man," observed the naturalist. "I shall take his whole collection back with me, since it is going to ruin here, and it belongs to no one."

"There will be no room for any of us in the auto if you keep on collecting things," observed Jerry.

But this seemed to make no difference to the professor. He went right on collecting as if he had a freight car at his disposal.

The travelers continued on their way, exploring the different buildings here and there.

"I'm tired," announced Bob, suddenly. "You fellows can go on, if you want to, but I'm going to sit down and take a rest."

He found a comfortable place in the shade, where a stone ledge was built against the side of a ruined house, and sat down. Jerry and Ned followed his example, for they, too, were leg-weary.

"I'll just take a look through this one place, and then we'll go back and have dinner," said the professor.

He entered the structure, against which the boys were sitting. It was a small, one-storied affair, and did not look as if it would contain anything of value. The naturalist had not been inside five minutes before the boys heard him calling, in excited tones:

"Come quick, boys!"

They ran in, to behold Professor Snodgrass with his arm stuck in a hole in the wall. He seemed to be pulling at something.

"What is it?" cried Jerry.

"A gila monster," replied the professor. "I saw him and I got him."

"It looks as if he had you," answered Ned.

"He tried to get away, but I grabbed him by the tail as he was going in his hole," went on the naturalist. "Now he's got his claws dug down in the dirt and I can't pull him out. Come out of there, my beauty!" he cried, addressing his remarks to the hidden gila monster. "Come out, my pet!"

Then, with a sudden yank the professor succeeded in drawing the animal from its burrow. It was a repulsive-looking creature of the lizard variety, and as the professor held it up by the tail it wiggled and tried to escape.

"Now I have you, my little darling!" the naturalist cried, popping his prize into his collecting-box.

"That would never take a prize at a beauty show," observed Ned. "I wouldn't touch it with a ten-foot pole."

"Well, this has been a most profitable day," went on the collector, as, with the boys, he turned toward their residence in the old temple. "I must come back this afternoon for the cabinet of curios."

Without further incident, save that nearly every step of the homeward journey the professor stopped to pick up some relic, the travelers reached the temple.

"Here goes for another bath!" cried Bob, running toward the room where the plunge was. "I'm nearly melted by the heat."

"I'm with you!" said Jerry.

Suddenly they heard the professor's voice calling them.

"I wonder what in the world is the matter now?" said Jerry.

He and Bob hurried outside where they had left the naturalist and Ned. They found the pair gazing down the street toward the tunnel entrance.

And as they gazed they saw the big door swing slowly open, while from the passage came Noddy

Nixon, Vasco Bilette and the others of their crowd. A low cry of surprise broke from Noddy as he stood face to face with the very persons he and Vasco were seeking.

CHAPTER XXIII.

BOB IS KIDNAPPED.

FOR a minute or two the unexpected encounter so astonished all concerned that no one spoke. Noddy seemed ill at ease from meeting his former acquaintances, but Vasco Bilette smiled in an evil way. Chance had thrown in his path the very person he wanted. Tom Dalsett was the first to speak.

"Well, we meet again," he said, with an attempt at cheerfulness. "How do you all do?"

"I don't know that we're any the better for seeing you," remarked Professor Snodgrass, who was plain-spoken at times.

"Oh, but I assure you it's a sight for sore eyes to get a glimpse of you once more," went on Tom. "Besides, this is a free city, you know, even if it is an old, underground one; and we have as much right here as you have."

"True enough," broke in Jerry. "But you may as well know, first as last, that we're done fooling with you and your gang, Noddy Nixon. If you annoy us again there's going to be trouble!"

Noddy did not reply. He seemed anxious to get away, but Dalsett and Vasco urged him to stay, and they had secured quite an influence over the youth.

"We must have come in by the same passage you did," went on Dalsett. "You left it open behind you. We were wandering around in the dark tunnel until we discovered this door a little while ago. Lucky, wasn't it?"

"For you chaps, yes," commented Ned.

"Some of us were nearly killed in the tumble," went on Dalsett. "We got out of it rather well, on the whole."

"You'd better come inside and have nothing more to say to him," said the professor to his friends. "This spoils all our plans."

"Never mind; perhaps we can give them the slip among the ruins," said Jerry.

He went back into the ancient temple, and the others followed him. Noddy continued to stare as if he thought the whole thing was a dream. As for Vasco and Dalsett, they were much pleased with the turn affairs had taken.

But the Mexicans were excited. Several of them had been bruised by the fall into the tunnel, and they wanted to proceed at once and kidnap Bob, so they could get the ransom money. But Vasco would not permit this. He did not believe in using force when he could use stealth. Besides, he was a cow-

ard, and afraid of getting hurt, if it came to a fight.

"Let them go," he said to his men, who murmured as they saw their prospective captive and his friends retreat into the temple. "Let them go. They can't get away from here without letting us know. We are better off than before. We can capture the fat boy whenever we want to now."

With that, Vasco's followers had to be content. As Dalsett had said, Noddy and his cronies, after groping about in the dark tunnel for some time, had finally discovered the door by which the boys and the professor had entered the ancient city. They had pushed it open and come face to face with our friends.

"Bah!" exclaimed one of the Mexicans. "It is always to-morrow and to-morrow in this business. Let us fight them! Let us get the captive and let us share the ransom."

"We'll do the trick to-night, sure," promised Vasco. "To-night, positively, we will kidnap Bob."

Meanwhile, all unconscious of the fate in store for him, Bob was making a substantial meal, for the travelers had begun to get dinner after withdrawing from the front of the temple. They talked of little save the appearance of Noddy and his followers.

"How do you suppose he ever got here?" asked Bob.

"Simply followed us," said Jerry. "We left a plain enough trail. Besides, automobiles are scarce in Mexico, and any one seeing ours pass by would easily remember it and tell whoever came along afterward, making inquiries."

"What had we better do?" asked Ned. "Stay here or go away?"

"There'll be more or less trouble if we stay," was Jerry's opinion. "Supposing we go away for a while and come back. If Noddy is after us we may give him the slip and return."

"How are we going to get out of this place?" asked Bob. "We can't go back through the tunnel we came in, as they are now on guard there."

"There must be more than one entrance to this city," spoke the professor. "I think I'll go and hunt for another. When we find it we can take the automobile with us and escape to-night. I wish to be the first person to announce this discovery to the world."

"That's the idea!" exclaimed Ned. "I'll go along to help hunt for another passage, while Bob and Jerry can stay on guard."

"In the meanwhile I'm going to have my swim," said Bob. He went into the tank-room, and immediately uttered a cry.

"What's the matter?" called Jerry.

"The water has all run out," replied Bob, "and there's a big hole here!"

The others came in on the run. They saw that the swimming-pool was empty. Only a little water remained on the bottom in small puddles. They also saw that the pool was made with an incline of stone leading from the floor level down to the bottom. In the side opposite from where the incline was a big black hole showed itself. When the water was at the normal level this hole was invisible. Once the water had lowered it was plain to see.

"What made the water go out?" asked Bob.

"Probably a gate at the end of the tunnel leading from the tank was opened," replied the naturalist. "Or it may be an automatic arrangement, so that when the tank gets filled up to a certain height the water shuts itself off. So we'll defer our bath until the water rises. Perhaps the tides may have some effect on it. We can only wait and see."

"That tunnel is big enough to drive our auto through," observed Bob.

A sudden thought came to Jerry. He whispered to the professor.

"Of course it could be done," replied the scientist after consideration, "but there is the danger of the water rising suddenly while we are in the tunnel. Jerry talks of escaping by means of this new shaft," went on the professor. "We could run the auto down the incline and so out. But we must investigate the place."

The naturalist walked down the incline. Straight

in front of them, as they neared it, yawned the black mouth of the passage. The professor would not let the boys come in until he had made an investigation.

He walked quite a distance down the shaft and returned. He seemed in deep thought.

"It will be safe to use the tunnel," he said. "It appears that the water was siphoned out. There is another tank or reservoir connected with this one. They both seem to be fed by springs. When the other tank, which is below the level and to one side, gets full of water, the fluid is siphoned out. As that tank is connected with the one we used, by a pipe, as soon as the water goes out of the first tank, that in the second follows to keep the first tank filled. And so it goes on, from day to day, repeating the operation once every twenty-four hours, I would judge. So we have plenty of time. The tunnel leads to one like that by which we entered the city. I have no doubt but that we can escape through it."

If the professor and the boys could at this time have seen two evil faces peering down at them from a high balcony, they might not have felt so comfortable. San Lucia and Murado were on the lookout, and every move the travelers made was watched.

It was decided to make the escape that night. Accordingly, after supper, the automobile was pre-

pared for a long trip. Things were packed in it, and the professor took along his beloved specimens.

"How are we going to get the car down the incline?" asked Bob.

"I can take it down, all right," replied Jerry.

At length all was in readiness. Jerry and Ned took the front seat, Bob cranked up the car, which was still inside the old temple, and then joined the professor on the rear seat.

"All ready?" asked Jerry.

"All ready," replied Bob.

"Yes, and we are ready, too!" came in a whisper from the ruined doorway of the temple, where Vasco Bilette and his men were in hiding, watching the flight of the travelers.

The Mexican had guessed some sort of an attempt to escape would be made, and was on hand to frustrate it. But the preparations made for taking the auto down into the empty water pool puzzled Vasco. So he was on the alert.

"Here we go!" called Jerry, softly. The auto was vibrating, but almost noiselessly, for the explosions of the motor could scarcely be heard.

Down the incline Jerry took the heavy car, without a mishap. Straight for the open mouth of the tunnel he steered it. It was as dark as pitch now, but the lamps on the car gave good illumination.

"Come on, we have them now!" cried Vasco to his followers. "The boy is in the back seat!"

The Mexicans ran down the incline. By this time the machine was well into the mouth of the shaft. Hearing footsteps behind him, resounding on the stone pavement, Jerry shut off the power for a moment. As he did so the car was surrounded by ugly-looking brigands, who had run up at a signal from Vasco.

"Quick! Grab him!" cried Dalsett.

"I have him!" replied Vasco.

He reached up, and, though Bob was a heavy lad, the Mexican, with the help of Dalsett, pulled him over the rear seat. Bob fought, kicked and struggled. It was of no avail. Then a sack was quickly thrown over his head, and the men ran back out of the tunnel and up the incline, bearing Chunky with them.

"Bob's been kidnapped!" shouted the professor. "Turn the auto around, Jerry, and chase after them!"

CHAPTER XXIV.

BOB TRIES TO FLEE.

In an instant Jerry tried to turn the auto around. He found the passage too narrow. There was nothing to do but to back up the incline. This was a slow process in the darkness.

"Fire at them!" cried Ned.

"No. You might hit Bob!" said the professor. "We must chase after the brigands. This is what they have been following us for. I wonder what they want of Bob?"

No one could guess. By this time Jerry had run the machine up the inclined plane and into the temple. Then he sent it out into the street. It was as dark as a pocket and not a trace of the kidnappers could be seen, nor could they be heard. The capture of Bob came as a terrible blow.

"Let's take to the tunnel where we came in!" cried Ned. "Perhaps they are hiding there."

"If they are, they are well armed, and their force is three times what ours is now," said the professor. "If we are to help Bob we will have to do it by strategy rather than by force. Come, we

had better go back to the temple. We can make our plans from there."

"Poor Chunky!" groaned Jerry. "I wonder what they are doing to him now?"

"I guess it was his money-belt they wanted more than they did him," put in Ned. "You know he carried what was left of the five hundred dollars."

"That's so!" exclaimed Jerry, with a rueful face.

"Never mind the money; I have plenty," put in the naturalist. "And don't worry; we'll find Bob yet."

Nothing could be done that night, so the professor and the two boys tried to get what sleep their troubled minds would allow. In the morning they made a hurried breakfast and then held a consultation. It was decided to explore the tunnel by which they had entered the city, and see if it still held the brigands and Noddy's crowd.

Arming themselves, the professor, Ned and Jerry advanced carefully through the big wooden gate. They proceeded cautiously, but no one opposed them. The tunnel was deserted. They came to the hole where they had tumbled down. The inclined plane of planks was there, in the same position as when the cave-in, produced by Murado, had occurred.

"They have probably gone back up here and are running across country," remarked Ned. "Hello!" he exclaimed. "What's that?"

He picked up a small object that lay at the foot of the incline, in the glare of the sunlight that streamed in from above.

"That's Bob's knife," said Jerry. "He had it yesterday. That shows he must have been here since. There is no doubt but that they have carried him away from here."

The professor agreed that this was probably the case. There was nothing left to do, so they returned to the temple.

"I hardly know what to do," said the naturalist. "We might take the automobile and ride off, not knowing where, in a vain endeavor to find Bob. Or we can stay here on the chance that he may escape and come back. If we went away he would not know where to find us.

"Then, too, I am hopeful we may hear something from Noddy Nixon or some of those Mexicans he had with him. Those fellows are regular brigands, and may have captured Bob, thinking we will pay a ransom for his return. On the whole, I think we had better stay here for a few days."

This seemed the best thing to do. With heavy hearts, Jerry and Ned wandered about the old temple, wishing their chum was back with them. The professor began to gather more specimens and made several trips to the old buildings where he got many curios of value.

Meanwhile, poor Bob was having his own trou-

bles. At the first rough attack of the kidnappers, when he was hauled over the back of the auto, he did not know what had happened. He supposed it was some accident, such as the tunnel caving in or the water suddenly rising.

But when he found himself held by two men, and the bag thrown over his head, he realized that he was a captive, though he did not know why any one would want him.

Holding him between them, Vasco and Dalsett ran back into the bath and up the incline, followed by Noddy and the Mexicans. Berry and Pender had been left in charge of the auto and horses, which were in the first tunnel.

Bob, who had not attempted to struggle after his first involuntary kicking when he was hauled out, decided that his captors were having too easy a time of it. He was by no means a baby, and though he was fat he had considerable muscle.

So he began to beat about with his fists, and to kick with his heavy shoes, in a manner that made it very uncomfortable for Vasco and Dalsett.

"Quit that, you young cub, or I'll hurt you!" exclaimed Vasco.

"Yes, an' I'll do the same!" growled Dalsett, and, recognizing the voice, Bob knew for the first time into whose hands he had fallen.

He did not heed the command to stop struggling,

and it was all the two men could do to hold him. Suddenly they laid him down.

"Look here!" exclaimed Dalsett, sitting on Bob to keep him still, "if you want us to tie you up like a steer we're willin' to do it. An' we'll gag you into the bargain. If you quit wigglin' you'll be treated decent."

"Then you take this bag off my head!" demanded Bob, with some spirit.

"I will if you promise to walk an' not make us carry you," promised Dalsett.

"I'll walk until I get a good chance to get away," replied Bob, determined to give no parole.

"Mighty little chance you have of gittin' away," remarked Dalsett, as he removed the sack.

It was as dark as a pocket, and Bob wondered where he was. Soon one of the men came with a lantern, and by the gleam the captive could see he was in the tunnel.

"Come on!" ordered Vasco.

Walking in the midst of his captors, Bob came to the foot of the incline. There he found Noddy, Pender and Bill Berry in the auto. The Mexicans had their horses in readiness for a flight.

"They're going to take me away," thought Bob. "I wonder how I can give the boys and the professor a sign so they will know that?"

His fingers came in contact with his knife and that gave him an idea. He dropped the implement

on the ground, where it was found by his friends later.

"Is everything ready?" asked Vasco.

"I guess so," replied Noddy. "Shall I run the machine up the incline?"

"Go ahead," said Dalsett. "We'll walk with our young friend here. I reckon the car will have trouble gittin' up the hill if too many gits in it."

"Come on, you fellows!" ordered Vasco of his Mexicans. "We have the captive now, and you'll soon be dividing the ransom money." He spoke in Spanish, which Bob could not understand. The boy was at a loss why so many should be interested in him, but laid it all to a plot of Noddy's to get square.

It was quite a pull for the auto, up the steep incline, but Noddy, by using the low gear, managed it. The horses and their riders had less trouble, and soon the whole party stood in the road near the tunnel that led to the underground city.

Bob was placed on a small pony, and his hands were tied behind his back. Then, with a Mexican riding before and after him, and one on each side, the cavalcade started off.

For several hours the journey was kept up. No one said much, and poor Bob puzzled his brains trying to think what it all meant. One thing he de-

termined on: that he would try to escape at the first opportunity.

It came sooner than he expected. He had been working at the bonds on his hands and found, to his joy, that the rope was coming loose. In their hurry, Vasco and Dalsett had not tied it very securely. In a little while Bob had freed his wrists, but he kept his hands behind his back, to let his captors think he was still bound.

He waited until he came to a level stretch of land. Then, at a time when the Mexican in the rear had ridden off to one side to borrow a cigarette of a comrade, Bob slipped from the pony's back.

He struck the ground rather hard, but here his fat served him in good stead, for he was not hurt much. Then he rolled quickly out of the way of the horses' feet.

Jumping up, he ran at top speed off to the left. Instantly the cavalcade was in confusion. Vasco and Dalsett came riding back to see what the trouble was. They saw Bob bounding away.

"After him!" shouted Vasco, drawing his revolver and firing in the air to scare Bob. "After him! He's worth ten thousand dollars!"

The Mexicans spurred their horses after the fugitive, while Noddy, turning the auto around, lighted the search-lamp and sent the light through

the blackness to pick out Bob so the others could find him in the darkness.

On and on ran the boy, and after him thundered the horses of his pursuers, coming nearer and nearer.

CHAPTER XXV.

AN UNEXPECTED FRIEND.

It was too uneven a chase to last long. Bob soon found that his enemies were gaining on him, and he resolved to play a trick. He came to a big rock and dropped down behind it, hiding in the shadow.

For a time the Mexicans were baffled, but they spread about in a half circle and Bob could hear them gradually surrounding him. Still he hoped to escape detection.

"Can't you find him?" he heard Noddy call.

"He seems to have given us the slip," replied Vasco. "But we'll get him yet."

Noddy sent the searchlight of the automobile all about the rock behind which Bob was hidden, but the deep shadow cast protected the boy.

At length, however, one of the Mexicans approached the place. At the same instant Bob was seized with an uncontrollable desire to sneeze. His nose tickled and, though he held his breath and did everything he had ever read about calculated to prevent sneezes, the tickling increased. Finally he gave voice to a loud "Ka-choo!"

"Diablo!" exclaimed the nearest Mexican. "What have we here?"

He was at the rock in an instant and lost no time in grabbing Bob. The boy tried to struggle and escape again, but his captor held him in a firm grip. The Mexican set up a shout at the discovery of his prize, which speedily brought Vasco and his comrades to the scene.

"So, you didn't care much for our company," observed Bilette. "But never mind, we think so much of you that we run after you wherever you go. Now we have you again!" and he laughed in an unpleasant manner.

"I don't see what you want of me," remarked Bob, as he was led back and placed on his pony.

"Ah, perhaps you are not aware that you are worth much money to us," said Vasco.

"I'll give you all I have if you'll let me go," said Bob.

"That is something we overlooked," said Dalsett. "Take his money, Vasco. He may have a few dollars."

In another minute Bob's money-belt, with the best part of five hundred dollars, was in the possession of the Mexicans. He wished he had kept still.

"This is doing very well," observed Vasco, as he counted over the bills with glistening eyes. "This

is very well indeed, and most unexpected. But we want more than this."

"It is all I have," answered Bob.

"But your people, your father has more," went on the Mexican. "I think if you were to write him a letter, stating that you were about to be killed unless he sent ten thousand dollars, he would be glad to give us the small amount."

"I'll never write such a letter!" exclaimed Bob. "You can kill me if you want to!"

"You'll think differently in the morning," remarked Vasco. "Here, you fellows, tie him up so he can't get away again!"

This time the ropes were knotted so tightly about the boy's arms and legs that he knew he could not work them loose. He was thrown over the back of the pony and the cavalcade started off again.

All night long the march continued, the men on their horses and Noddy and his friends in the auto. Poor Bob felt sick at heart over his failure to escape and the knowledge, conveyed to him in Vasco's remarks, that he was being held for ransom.

Just as day was beginning to break, the party reached a small Mexican village and preparations were made to spend some time there. Vasco and his men seemed to know the place well, for they were greeted by many of the inhabitants of the place who had arisen early. Noddy ran the automobile under

a shed and then the whole crowd, taking Bob with them, went to a large house at the end of the principal street, where they evidently intended to make their headquarters.

Bob was taken to a small room on the second floor, facing the courtyard, which is a feature of all Mexican homes. His bonds were released and he was thrust roughly inside.

The apartment was bare enough. There were a table, a chair and a bed in the room. The only window was guarded by heavy iron bars, and the single door was fastened with a massive lock.

"I guess I'll have trouble getting out of here," said Bob to himself. "It's a regular prison. I wonder if they're going to starve me?"

He began to suffer for want of water, and his stomach cried for food. He had some thought of pounding on the walls and demanding to be fed, when the door opened and a girl quickly entered, setting on the table a tray of food. She was gone before Bob had a chance to get a good look at her, but he saw that she was young and pretty, attired as she was in gay Mexican colors.

Though the meal was not very appetizing, it tasted to Bob as if it was the best dinner ever served. He felt better after eating it, and more hopeful.

For several days he was held a captive in the

room. One evening Vasco Bilette and Tom Dalsett paid him a visit.

"We have brought a paper for you to sign," said Vasco.

"I will sign nothing," replied Bob.

"I think you will, my boy," spoke the Mexican. "Bring in the charcoal, Tom."

Dalsett went out and returned with a small, portable clay stove in which burned some charcoal. Heating in the flames was an iron used for branding cattle.

"You can take your choice of signing this or of seeing how you look with a hot iron on," said Vasco. "This paper is a letter to your father, telling him you have been captured by brigands, who will not let you go excepting they are paid ten thousand dollars."

"I'll never sign!" replied Bob, firmly.

"Then brand him!" cried Vasco.

One of the Mexicans took the iron from the fire. It glowed with a white, cruel heat. At the sight of it Bob's courage melted away. At the same time a plan came into his head.

"I'll sign!" he exclaimed.

"I thought you would," observed Vasco. "Put your name here."

He handed Bob a letter, written to Mr. Baker, whose name and address Noddy Nixon had supplied. In brief, it demanded that ten thousand dol-

lars be sent to the brigands and left in a lonely spot mentioned, if Mr. Baker did not want to hear of the death of his son. Any attempt to capture the writers, the missive stated, would be met with the instant killing of the boy.

"Sign there," said Vasco, indicating the place.

Bob did so. At the same time he placed beneath his signature a scrawl and a row of figures.

To the Mexicans figures meant nothing, and it is doubtful if they observed them. But to Mr. Baker they spelled out the message: "Send no money. I can get away."

They were figures in a secret cypher bank code that Mr. Baker sometimes used, and which Bob had learned.

"I guess that will fool them," thought the boy, as he saw his captors take away the letter.

For the next few days nothing occurred. Bob was kept a close prisoner in his room, and the only person he saw was the girl who brought him food. He tried to talk to her, but she did not seem to understand English.

The captive was beginning to despair. He feared he would never see his friends again, for he did not believe his father would send the money, and without it he was sure the desperate men would kill him.

His confidence in his ability to escape lessened as the days went by. He tried to pick the lock on his door, and loosen a bar at the window, but

without success. It was the fifth day of his captivity and the Mexican girl came to bring him his supper.

To Bob's surprise, this time she did not hurry away. She set the tray of food down and looked at him anxiously.

"You want go?" she asked, in a broken accent.

"You mean escape? Get away from here? Leave?" asked Bob, taking sudden hope.

"Um! Go 'way. Leave bad mans! Maximina help! You go?"

"Of course," replied Bob. "But how are you going to manage it?"

"Wait till dark. Me come. You go, we go. Leave bad mans. Me no like it here. Bad mans whip Maximina."

By which Bob understood that the girl would come when it got dark and help him to escape, accompanying him because she herself had been ill treated by the Mexicans.

"Be good boy! Me come. You glad!" she said, in a whisper.

Just then the sound of voices was heard outside the room, in the corridor.

"Hush! No tell!" cautioned the girl as she glided from the room.

Bob began to eat his supper. His heart was in a flutter of hope.

"Queer why that money don't come," he heard Vasco say, outside. "We'll have to do something pretty soon."

It was getting dark now, and Bob waited anxiously.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE ESCAPE OF MAXIMINA.

SEVERAL hours passed. Bob was beginning to think Maximina had forgotten her promise, when he heard a soft footstep outside. Then came a gentle tapping at his door. It was unlocked from the outside, opened, and the Mexican girl stepped in.

"Hush!" she whispered. "We go now. All bad mans gone to feast—holiday. We go. Put on cloak."

She gave Bob a long, dark serape, and produced one for herself. Little time was lost. Led by Maximina, Bob passed out into the dark corridor, down the stairs and through the courtyard, out of the house, under the silent stars that twinkled in the sky.

"This way!" whispered the girl. "We ride ponies. No one here, we take horses. Where you live?"

Bob was at a loss what to do. He wondered how he could make Maximina, whose language he could not speak, and who could talk but imperfectly

in his, understand about the underground city. Equally hard would it be to make her comprehend where he lived and how to start for the nearest large city in order to get help or communicate with his friends.

He remembered that his captors had brought him almost directly north as they sped away from the buried city. So he thought the best thing to do would be to ride to the south, when he might see some landmark that would aid him in locating himself.

"We'll go this way," he said, pointing in a direction opposite to that of the north star, which he saw blazing in the sky.

"All right," exclaimed the Mexican girl. She leaped to the back of one of two ponies she had brought from the stable. Bob was not so expert, but managed to get into the saddle.

So far they had met no one, nor had they heard the sound of any of the Mexicans. As Maximina had said, all of the men were away to a feast, one of the numerous ones celebrated in the country. Even Noddy and his friends had gone, so there was no one left to guard Bob but the girl.

Away they rode, urging their ponies to a gallop. Bob was fearful that at every turn of the road he would meet with some of Vasco's men, but the highway appeared to be deserted.

"Me glad to go. Bad mans steal Maximina

years ago," said the girl, after half an hour's ride. "Me want to get back to own people."

"I wish I could help you," said Bob, "but I'm about as badly off as you are. The Mexicans stole me, too."

"We both same, like orphans," said Maximina. "Never min'. Maybe we find our folks."

By degrees she brokenly told Bob her story, how she had been kidnapped by Vasco when she was a child, and how he had kept her because her father was too poor to pay the ransom demanded. She had gradually come to be regarded as a regular inmate of the Mexican camp, which, it seemed, was an organized headquarters for kidnappers and brigands generally.

She had never thought of escaping before, she said, but when she saw Bob she felt sorry for him and resolved to free not only him, but herself.

"We ride faster," she said, after several miles had been covered. "Gettin' late. Men come back from feast find us gone, they ride after."

She urged her pony to a gallop and Bob's animal followed its leader.

"If I only had a revolver or a gun I'd shoot some of them if they tried to take us back," Bob said to himself. "I hope we can get away."

In a small village, about ten miles from the camp of the Mexicans, Vasco and his friends were having a great time. There were wild music and

dancing, and plenty of food well seasoned with red pepper. The Mexicans were having what they called fun.

Noddy, with Jack and Bill Berry, looked on, taking no part in the revels. They had come over in the automobile, while Vasco and his gang rode their horses.

It was past midnight when the leader of the Mexicans decided that it was time to start for home.

"Come on," he said. "Who knows but what our prisoner has escaped."

"Not much danger of that," said Dalsett. "I told Maximina that if he got away we'd hold her responsible and give her a good lashing. She'll not let him get away."

But neither Dalsett nor Vasco knew what they were talking about. The Mexicans were reluctant to leave the dance, but Vasco insisted. Soon the whole party was riding back to camp, Noddy being in advance in his auto.

He was the first to reach the kidnappers' headquarters. Dalsett was with him.

"I wonder how our captive is?" said the latter.

He went up to the room where Bob had been locked up. To his surprise and anger, the apartment was empty.

"Maximina!" he called.

There was no answer.

"They've gone!" he exclaimed. "Here, Noddy, ride back and meet Vasco. Tell him Bob has got away!"

The automobile was sent flying down the road. Vasco Bilette and his party were met and the news quickly imparted.

"We'll catch 'em!" cried the Mexican. "They have only a few hours' start, and only two slow ponies to ride on. Here, I'll go in the auto with Noddy. You fellows come after me!"

Vasco took Jack Pender's place in the machine and soon the chase was on. Vasco rightly concluded that Bob and Maximina would head for the south, so he, too, took the road leading in that direction.

Noddy speeded up the car, under Vasco's directions. Faster and faster it raced, the searchlight throwing out a glaring beam far in advance.

Meanwhile, Bob and Maximina were making all speed possible. Every now and then the girl would halt her pony and listen intently.

"They no come yet," she would say. "No can hear horses comin' after us. We get 'way, maybe."

Bob certainly hoped so. His experience as a captive was not such as to cause him to like the rôle, and he longed to be with his friends, who, he knew, must be greatly alarmed about him.

It seemed to be getting darker as the two traveled on.

"Be sunrise 'bout hour," said Maximina, and Bob remembered that he had read about it being darkest just before daybreak. "We mus' hide then," the girl went on.

Suddenly a sound came to them from over the dark fields that bordered the road. At the same time there was a shaft of light.

"There they come!" cried Bob. "They're after us in the automobile!"

"Ride! Ride fast!" called Maximina, fiercely. "If they catch us they kill!"

She lashed her pony with the short whip she carried, and struck Bob's animal several smart blows. The two beasts leaped forward.

But horses, especially small, Mexican ponies, are not built to race against large touring automobiles. Bob noticed that the chug-chug of Noddy's machine came nearer and nearer.

"Maybe we can hide from them in the darkness," said Bob. "It's our only chance. They'll soon be up to us."

"No hide! Keep on ride!" exclaimed Maximina. "We git away!"

But even as she spoke the searchlight picked them up and they were revealed in its blinding glare. A faint shout from their pursuers told that they had been seen.

The ponies were tiring. Already Bob's was staggering along as the pace told on it. Maximina's was a little better off.

"We have them!" Bob heard Vasco shout. "They are both together. Put a little more speed on, Noddy!"

The chug-chugs of the auto told that the machine was being sent ahead at a faster clip. The searchlight glared more strongly on the fugitives.

"Cave somewhere near here," said Maximina. "If we could find 'um we be safe. Ride more, Bob."

"This pony can't go much farther," replied the boy. "His legs are shaking now."

Crack!

A flash of reddish fire cut the blackness, and a bullet sang unpleasantly close over Bob's head.

"They only shoot to scare!" cried Maximina. "They no want to kill you. Too valuable. Want ransom; much money; ten thousand dollars."

"All the same, it's no fun to be shot at," remarked Bob, urging his pony on.

The automobile was now but a few hundred feet away. Noddy had to reduce his speed because the ground was getting rougher.

"We'll have them in another minute!" cried Vasco.

At that instant, Bob's pony, stepping in a hole,

stumbled and fell, throwing the rider over its back. Bob struck the ground heavily and was stunned.

"Me stay with you!" exclaimed Maximina, reining in her pony and coming back to where Bob was.

"No, no! You ride on!" the boy said, faintly. "Maybe you can find my friends and send help. They are in the underground city!"

"All right. Me go! Bring help!" the girl whispered, and, leaping on her pony's back, she rode off to one side, getting away from the glare of the searchlight and so escaping observation.

Two minutes later the auto came up to where Bob was stretched out on the ground Vasco leaped out before the machine had fairly stopped and made a grab for Bob.

"The boy is dead!" he exclaimed.

"Dead!" faltered Noddy. He was beginning to be alarmed over the part he had played.

"Bring a light here!" commanded the Mexican.

Noddy turned the search-lamp on Bob's prostrate form. At that the boy opened his eyes. He had fainted from pain caused by his fall.

"Shamming, eh?" sneered Vasco, striking Bob a blow with a rope he carried. "Get up, now! No nonsense; you've made trouble enough!"

Poor Bob was too discouraged and felt too bad to reply. The other Mexicans rode up. In a few minutes the captive was securely bound, lifted into

the auto, and, as dawn broke, the start back to camp was made.

"Don't you want Maximina?" asked Dalsett.

"Let her go," replied Vasco. "She was only a bother around, and never liked to work. She can't do any harm."

CHAPTER XXVII.

A STRANGE MESSAGE.

THE days were full of anxiety for the professor, Jerry and Ned, who still remained in the ancient city after Bob had been kidnapped. Every night they went to bed, hoping some word would be received by morning, or that the missing one would return. Every morning they said to each other:

"Well, something will happen to-morrow."

But nothing happened, and, as day after day went by, they began to lose hope.

"We may as well leave here," said Ned.

"Not yet," Jerry replied. "I am sure we will have some word from Bob soon now."

In the meanwhile, they made trips in all directions from the ancient city. But there was no trace of the Mexicans. The country was uninhabited for twenty miles in every direction from the buried place, and farther than that the travelers did not venture.

"We must be here every night," said the professor. "Somehow, I feel that Bob will come back at night, or we will hear something from him after

dark. So we do not want to be away then, for if he should come, or if he should send some word, we would not be here to receive it."

For that reason little was done toward hunting for the kidnapped boy. The travelers did not go so far but that they could get back by nightfall.

They explored the city thoroughly and the professor found many more rare and valuable relics. His specimen boxes were full to overflowing, but still he kept searching.

The boys occupied themselves by getting the meals and attending to the camp, for the naturalist bothered himself about nothing but his specimens. They still continued to reside in the old temple, which they found a comfortable place.

"I wonder what we'll do when our food gives out?" asked Ned one day when it was his turn to get the dinner.

"Why, haven't we got plenty for several weeks yet?" inquired Jerry.

"It don't look so to me," said Ned, glancing in the box where the canned stuff was kept.

"That's queer," remarked Jerry. "There aren't any tomatoes left. Did you cook any since yesterday?"

"You cooked yesterday," retorted Ned. "Were there any then?"

"Six cans," said Jerry. "Now there are none left. I wonder if the professor took any?"

"Any what?" asked the naturalist, coming into the temple just then.

"Tomatoes," replied Jerry, explaining what he and Ned had been talking about.

"No; I haven't touched a can," said the professor.

"Then some one has, and it isn't us," was Ned's opinion. "I wonder if there is any one in this temple but ourselves?"

"Now that you speak of it, I think there is," went on the naturalist. "The other night I was restless and could not sleep well. I was looking out of the door of our bedroom, into the main apartment, when I saw something white moving. At first I thought it was one of you boys, but I looked over on your cots and saw you both were sleeping. Then I thought it might be a white monkey, for I have heard there are such kinds, though I have never seen any. But when I looked a little closer I saw that it was a man wrapped in a long, white serape.

"I didn't give any alarm, for I was afraid of waking you boys. But I watched and saw the man go to our box and take out some cans of provisions. I meant to speak about it the next morning, but I forgot it."

"Who do you suppose it was?" asked Jerry.

"Probably some poor wandering Mexican," replied the professor. "He may have happened

along, fallen into the passage leading to this old city and been half starved until he found our camp."

"We'll have to look out, though," said Ned. "We have hardly enough left for ourselves."

"Then we must keep watch to-night," decided the professor. "It will not do for us to starve, though we will share what we have with any one who is in distress."

And so, that night, they took turns in mounting guard. None of them saw anything out of the ordinary, though had they been able to witness a scene that took place in an obscure gallery of the temple they would have been surprised.

San Lucia and Murado were still hiding in the place, waiting their chance to get something of value from the travelers. The capture of Bob had upset the plans of the two aged brigands, and they were a little cautious about proceeding. But for several nights they had made raids on the improvised pantry Ned had constructed.

"Are we to go again to-night?" asked San Lucia, on the evening when Ned made the discovery that led to the posting of the guard.

"It remains to be seen," replied Murado. "If we have no better luck than last night it is of little use."

"No; tomatoes are a poor substitute for gold,"

agreed San Lucia. "I wonder if they have nothing but things to eat in those cans."

"Some of them must contain gold," replied Murado. "They do it to fool us, but we will get the best of them yet. We will carry off every can they have until we get those containing the treasure."

For the two Mexicans believed that the travelers had packed their gold in the tin cans, of which there was a number. And each night San Lucia and Murado had stolen a few, hoping that some of them contained gold. Each time, on opening the tins, they had been disappointed.

"I will go first to-night," said San Lucia. "I feel that I will be successful. Once we get the gold we can leave this place."

About midnight he crept as softly as a cat upon the travelers. But, to his surprise, he found Jerry on guard and armed. San Lucia sneaked back to the balcony and told Murado.

"They are becoming suspicious," said the latter. "We will have to wait a while. Perhaps they may be sleeping to-morrow night."

But the two aged brigands never got another chance to attempt to rob the boys and the professor. Why this was we shall soon see.

The next morning, on account of the watch that was kept, nothing was found disturbed.

"We fooled somebody that time," observed Ned.

After breakfast the professor announced that he was going to visit the house where he had, on a previous call, captured the gila monster.

"There was a cabinet there I overlooked," he said. "Do you boys want to come along?"

"There is nothing else to do," said Jerry. "How I wish we would hear something from Bob! I think we ought to go out on a search for him. It doesn't seem that he will ever come here, after all this time."

"I was thinking that myself," said the professor. "If we hear nothing by to-morrow we will leave this place."

The boys accompanied the naturalist to the ruined house. It seemed strange to be walking through the streets of a place that had been inhabited thousands of years ago. The city was a silent one, a veritable city of the dead, and the houses and buildings seemed like tombstones that had toppled over from age.

As Ned was walking about through the lower rooms of the house the professor had marked for exploration, he noticed a ring fastened to a square stone in the courtyard.

"I wonder what this is for?" he said.

"Looks as if it was meant to lift the stone up by," replied Jerry.

"Give us a hand," said Ned, "and we'll see what's here."

The two boys pulled and tugged, but could not budge the stone. The professor happened along and saw them.

"I'll show you how to do it," he said.

He took a long pole and thrust it through the ring. Then, using the pole as a lever, he easily raised the stone.

"Now let's see what we have unearthed," he remarked.

The stone had covered a small hole. In it was a little casket of lead, the lid of which was locked.

"We'll have to break it open," said Jerry.

"Get a stone," put in Ned.

Jerry brought a large one. One or two heavy blows and the lid of the box flew off. There was a sudden sparkle of light and several white objects fell to the ground.

"Diamonds!" cried the professor. "We have made a valuable discovery!"

The box seemed full of jewels. There were stones of many colors, but most of all were the white, sparkling ones.

"Maybe they're only glass," suggested Ned.

"No; they are diamonds, rubies, turquoise and other precious stones," replied the professor. "This was probably the jewel case of some Aztec millionaire."

They returned to their camp, carrying the jewels

with them. As they entered the old building, Jerry, who was in the lead, started back.

"There's some one at our auto!" he exclaimed.

"Nonsense!" replied the professor. "The place is deserted."

But he changed his mind a moment later. As he entered the room he saw a girlish figure clinging to the side of the car. She seemed to be almost dead, and had only strength enough left to mutter:

"Bob; he want you! Vasco Bilette have him! Come quick!"

Then she fell over in a faint.

CHAPTER XXVIII

TO THE RESCUE.

"WHO is she?" asked Ned.

"I don't know," replied the professor, calmly. He seemed to take the appearance of a strange girl in the underground city as a happening that might occur at any time.

"Where did she come from?" asked Jerry.

"I can't tell you that, either," went on the naturalist. "One thing I can say, though, and that is, this poor girl needs help. She must be hungry, and she has traveled a long distance. Her clothes show that."

"What did she mean by speaking about Bob, saying Vasco Bilette had him, and for us to come quick?" asked Ned.

"All that in good time," replied the professor. "The thing to do now is to bring her out of her faint, and get her something to eat. Ned, you make the coffee and Jerry will heat some chicken soup. Hurry now, boys."

But the lads needed no urging. In a jiffy the camp-stove was going and hot coffee was soon

ready. In the meanwhile the professor, by use of some simple remedies he always carried, brought the girl out of her faint. She opened her eyes and asked for a drink.

The hot coffee, followed by a little of the warm soup, brought the color back to her face, and she was able to sit up. She stared at her strange surroundings and looked at the boys and the naturalist.

"Me Maximina," she said, speaking slowly. "You Ned, Jerry and Mr. Snowgrass?"

"Snodgrass, Snodgrass, my dear young lady," replied the professor, bowing low. "Professor Uriah Snodgrass, A. M., Ph.D., M. D., F. R. G. S., A. Q. K., all of which is at your service."

"Bob need you," said the girl, simply. "He try to come, but he git ketch."

"Yes, yes! Tell us about him. Where can we find him?" asked Jerry, eagerly.

"Me no spik Inglis good," the girl replied. "You spik Spanish, señor?"

"Si," answered the professor.

Thereupon Maximina let forth a torrent of words that nearly overwhelmed the naturalist. Yet he managed to understand what she said.

Maximina told how she had been at the Mexicans' camp when Bob was brought there, she having been a captive for many years. She determined to help him escape, and did so when the oppor-

tunity offered. She told how she knew, in a general way, where the buried city was, as Bob had told her something about it, and she had overheard Vasco and his men talking about the locality where they had fallen down the tunnel.

"But Bob's horse fell and threw him off," she explained, in her native tongue. "I wanted to stay with him, but he told me to go on. Then Vasco came and got him, but I rode away, for I wanted to find you. I had hard work, and I lost my way several times. Three days ago my pony died and I walked the rest of the distance."

"Poor girl! You must be almost tired to death," said the professor.

"I was tired, but it is happiness to find you, señors, for I know you will go and help Señor Bob."

"Of course we will, right away," said the naturalist.

"She seems to have taken a sudden liking to our friend Bob," commented Ned. "She's a mighty pretty girl, too; don't you think so, Jerry?"

"Be careful," laughed Jerry. "Don't go to having any love affairs with beautiful Mexican maidens. I have read that they are a very jealous and quick-tempered nation. Besides, you are too young."

"I'm a year older than Bob," maintained Ned.

"Now, boys, what had we better do?" asked

the professor. "Maximina can guide us to the place where Bob is held captive. Shall we go and give battle to these brigands?"

"Sure!" exclaimed Ned. "We have plenty of ammunition."

"And they are about ten to our one," put in Jerry. "But we've got to do something," he added, seriously.

"Then we'll start as soon as we can get in shape," decided the professor. "I have a better plan than making a direct attack on the camp of the Mexicans, however. We will go to the authorities and ask their aid. Maximina says there is a detachment of soldiers stationed about thirty miles from here and on the line we must take to go to the camp, from which they are distant about ten miles."

"Bully!" cried Ned. "With a few soldiers to help us we'll give those brigands and Noddy Nixon such a licking that they'll never want another."

The automobile was soon made ready. In it was packed all that remained of the provisions. The professor did up his precious specimens and curios, not forgetting the lead casket of jewels.

The water tank was filled. Fortunately, there was still plenty of gasolene left. Jerry and Ned pumped up the tires, Maximina was invited to a seat in the rear, with the professor, and the trav-

elers, taking a last look at the underground city, started off.

They went through the tunnel, up the incline, the fall of which had precipitated them into the shaft, and soon were on the level road, speeding to the rescue of Bob.

After Vasco had secured his captive, following Bob's and Maximina's flight, the brigand took measures to insure that the prisoner would not get away again. Bob was placed in a regular dungeon, and outside the door was stationed a man with a gun.

The poor lad was in low spirits. He began to give up hope, and the only thing that cheered him was the thought that perhaps Maximina might have gotten away and would notify his friends or the authorities.

But Bob knew it was a remote chance, for he did not believe the frail girl could stand the long journey alone. He tried to learn something about her; whether she had been recaptured or not; but to all questions his guard, and the old woman who brought him food, returned but one answer, and that was:

"No spik Inglis, señor."

Bob saw it was of no use to try to get out of the dungeon. It was built partially underground, the walls were of stone and the door a massive wooden one, while the single window was heavily barred.

It was hot in the small cell, and Bob suffered very much. But he tried to keep up a brave heart.

One day he heard voices outside of the dungeon window. He listened intently and found that Noddy and Vasco were talking. Vasco, of necessity, had to speak English in talking with Noddy, who understood only a little Spanish.

"Have you got the money yet?" asked Noddy.

"No; and I think we never will get it," replied Vasco, angrily. "I don't believe the boy is the son of a rich banker at all. It's another one of your wild dreams, just like the gold mine the crazy professor was going to locate."

"Bob's father is rich," maintained Noddy. "It ain't my fault that he won't send the cash."

"Well, it's your fault for getting me into this muss," went on Vasco, "and it'll be your fault if we don't get some money pretty soon. The men are mad and I won't be able to manage 'em in a few days. They blame it all on you, so you'd better look out!"

"Do you suppose they—they will ki-kill me?" faltered Noddy.

"I shouldn't be surprised," said Vasco, coldly.

At that instant Bob heard some one come galloping up on a horse. It seemed to be a messenger, for he heard the steed come to a stop, while a man jumped down and began talking rapidly in Spanish.

"What is it? Has Bob's father sent the money?" asked Noddy.

"Money? No!" snapped the leader of the brigands. "But the soldiers are after us! We must get out of here!"

Bob's heart thrilled with hope. Perhaps, after all, Maximina had been able to send help. He almost laughed in his happiness, thinking he would soon be free.

But his hopes were dashed to the ground when, a few minutes later, his guard came into his cell, quickly bound his hands and feet, wrapped a long cloak about him, and, with the aid of another Mexican, carried him out of the cell.

Bob realized, from the change of air, that he was being carried into the open. He could see nothing because of the cloak about his head, but he could hear much bustle and confusion.

Men were running here and there, while Vasco was giving quick orders. Then the sound of the automobile being started was heard. Bob felt himself lifted into the car and, a few seconds later, he felt the vibration that told he was being carried away again, this time in Noddy's machine.

As the messenger had told Vasco, the soldiers were on their way to the camp of the kidnappers. The boys and the professor had reached the garrison, and, telling their story, had induced the commander to send a detachment to capture the Mexi-

cans. But the troops traveled slowly, and one of Vasco's friends, who happened to be hanging about the fort, hearing of the contemplated raid, mounted a swift horse and rode off to give the alarm.

So when, a few hours after Vasco had fled with his men and his captive, the troops galloped up, led by Jerry, Ned, Maximina and the professor in the automobile, they found the camp deserted.

"The birds have flown!" exclaimed the captain of the troopers. "We may as well go back!"

"No!" cried Jerry. "We must take after them. Bob must be rescued!"

"But how can we tell where they went?" asked the captain.

"That woman can tell you!" exclaimed Maximina, pointing to an aged crone who was trying to escape observation in one of the huts.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE FIGHT.

"BRING her here!" commanded the captain.

Several of his soldiers ran toward the old woman who set up a loud screaming.

"Who is she?" asked the leader of the troops of Maximina.

"An old servant of Vasco's," replied the girl. "She knows all his secrets and can tell where he has gone. He has several hiding places about here."

Protesting and crying that she knew nothing and could tell nothing, the aged servant was brought to the captain.

"Where is Vasco Bilette?" he asked.

"I know not! I have not seen him these three days!" she exclaimed.

"So," commented the captain, smiling. "We will see if we cannot refresh your memory. Pedro, fetch my rawhide whip!"

At this the woman howled most dismally, and threw herself on the ground, clinging to the legs of the men who held her.

"I cannot allow this," interposed Professor Snodgrass, to whom the conversation, carried on in Spanish, was intelligible. "Even at the cost of seeing Vasco Bilette escape I will not stand by and see a woman whipped."

"But, señor, you do not understand the case," said the captain. "That is the only way I can get the truth out of her. I must give her a few blows to loosen her tongue. That is the only persuasion these cattle understand; blows and money."

"Why not try the latter?" suggested the naturalist.

"Who has money to throw away on such as she?" asked the commander, with a shrug of his shoulders.

"I will pay her," went on the professor. "See," he went on, taking out some bank-notes. "Tell us where Vasco went and you shall have fifty dollars."

The old woman glanced at the money, looked around on the soldiers and glared at the captain, who was switching a cruel whip. Then she said, sullenly:

"I will tell you, señor, but not for money. It is because you had a kind thought for old Julia. Listen, Vasco has gone to the cave by the small mountain."

"I know where that is!" exclaimed the captain. "Many a time have we had fights there with the brigands. It is about ten miles off."

"Then let us hurry there!" cried Jerry.

The professor handed the old woman the bills. She took them, hiding them quickly in her dress.

"The whip would have been cheaper," said the captain, with a regretful sigh. "It is money thrown away."

"I have more to throw after it, if you and your men rescue the kidnapped boy!" exclaimed the naturalist, for he understood something of the Mexican character.

"Good!" cried the captain. "Come, men, hurry! We will wipe the brigands from the face of the earth!"

Indeed, new enthusiasm seemed to be infused into the soldiers at the mention of money. Those who had dismounted, sprang quickly to the saddles, the bugler blew a lively air, and the troops started off at a smart trot. Old Julia was left behind in the camp of the kidnappers.

The boys and the professor, with Maximina, in the automobile, followed the troopers.

"I think there will be one big fight," said the girl, in English, speaking to the boys. "Vasco has many guns in the cave."

"I hope it will be his last fight," said Ned. "I don't wish any one bad luck, but I would like to see Vasco Bilette and his gang put where they can do no more harm."

"The soldiers don't seem to take this very seri-

ously," remarked Jerry. "Hear them singing and laughing."

"They probably want Vasco to know they are coming, so they will not take him by surprise," spoke the professor. "It's a trait of Mexican politeness, I suppose."

The captain of the troop came riding back to the automobile, which had kept in the rear of the horsemen.

"My compliments, señor," said the commander, bowing with a sweep of his helmet to the professor.

"My best regards to you," replied the naturalist.

"We will be up to the vicinity of the cave in about an hour," went on the captain. "Is it your desire to charge in the fire-wagon with my troopers, or do you prefer to stay in the rear and watch us dispose of this brigand?"

"We're not the ones to stay in the rear when there's fighting to be done," said the professor. "You will find us in the fore, Señor Captain."

"Very good; but what about the girl?"

"I will stay with my friends," replied Maximina. "I am not afraid of Vasco Bilette."

"You may stay with us," consented the naturalist, "but I must insist on you getting down on the bottom of the car when the fighting begins."

"Fighting? There will be no fighting," said the captain.

"Aren't you going to tackle the brigands and get Bob?" asked Jerry, in some surprise.

"*Caramba!* The dogs will run when they see my troops," spoke the captain, puffing out his chest. "They will not stand. That is why I said there would be no fighting."

"I wouldn't be too sure," remarked the professor.

"You shall see, señor," went on the commander. "But now I must go back to my men. My compliments, señor."

"Mine to you," responded the professor, not to be outdone in politeness.

The cavalcade moved forward for several miles. It was getting hot and horses and men began to suffer. It was a relief when a small stream was reached, where every one could get a refreshing drink. After a short rest the command to move forward was given.

"What is that?" cried Jerry, suddenly, pointing ahead to where, on a broad, level stretch of country, several small, dark, moving objects could be seen.

"I will tell you directly," said the professor, taking a pair of field-glasses from their case. He leveled the binoculars and gazed steadily through them.

"It is Vasco and his party!" he cried. "I can see Noddy in his auto, and there are a number of

horsemen. They have not yet reached the cave. Quick, Jerry, run the machine ahead and tell the captain!"

Jerry increased the speed of the auto. It ran up beside the trooper captain, who turned about to see what was up.

"There are the brigands!" exclaimed the professor, pointing ahead. "Hurry up and you can catch them before they get to the cave, where they may barricade themselves."

"My compliments, señor; I thank you for the information," replied the captain, bowing low. "Will you not smoke a cigarette with me?"

"I don't smoke!" snapped the professor. "Besides, we have no time for that now. We must fight!"

"Exactly, just so," answered the easy-going Mexican. "Come, men!" he exclaimed. "The enemy is in front of you! At them, and show what stuff you are made of! Bugler, sound the charge!"

Instantly the troops were full of excitement. Men began unslinging their carbines. They got out their ammunition and seemed eager for the fray. The bugler blew a merry blast.

"Forward, my brave men! Cut down the brigands! Kill the kidnappers of boys!" shouted the captain, waving his sword.

With a shout, the Mexican soldiers dashed forward to the fight. They might be slow, and given

to too much delay and politeness, but when the time came they were full of action.

They yelled as they dug spurs into their horses, and the more excited threw their hats into the air. Several discharged their carbines when there was no chance of hitting any of the enemy. They were wild at the thought of battle.

By this time the brigands became aware of the pursuit. Vasco Bilette had, with a powerful field-glass, detected the advance of the horsemen some time back. But an accident to the auto had detained them, and they were three miles from the cave when he saw the soldiers dashing toward him.

He and his men strained every nerve, but they soon saw they could not get to their stronghold ahead of their enemies.

"We'll have to fight 'em," said Vasco. "I guess we can give 'em as good as they send. Noddy and Dalsett, you keep an eye on Bob, and if you get a chance, skip off with him. Go back to camp; they won't think of looking for you there."

Ten minutes later the soldiers were within shooting distance. They opened fire on the Mexicans, who, not daunted by the numbers against them, returned the volleys. At first so great was the excitement that no damage was done. But after a few rounds two of the troopers were injured, and one of the Mexicans had to withdraw, seriously wounded.

"We must never surrender!" cried Vasco.

"Exterminate the brigands!" shouted the soldiers.

They came to closer quarters. The soldiers began to use their carbines for clubs, not taking the time to reload. Then they drew their sabres and charged the Mexicans under Vasco, who had drawn his force up in a hollow square. Several on both sides were killed in this mêlée.

The boys and the professor, who, under the captain's later orders, had kept to the rear, now came dashing up in the automobile. Maximina was lying down on the floor of the tonneau, out of harm's way.

Jerry was keeping an eye on Noddy and his auto, and he noticed that the machine, which, as he could see plainly now, held Bob, kept well behind the brigands.

"We must get Bob, no matter what happens," said Jerry to Ned. "Look sharp now. I'm going to try something."

"What is it?" asked Ned.

"Just you watch!" exclaimed Jerry. "Look out!"

He ducked, to avoid a bullet that sang over his head.

"What's the use of doing that?" asked Ned. "The bullet is past when you hear it sing."

"Can't help it," replied Jerry.

The fighting was now at its height. Though the force on both sides was small, the guns kept up a continuous fusillade, and it sounded as though a good-sized detachment was going into action.

"No quarter! Not a man must escape!" cried the captain.

"Charge!" yelled Vasco Bilette, trying to urge his men to make a rush and overwhelm the soldiers. "Charge and the day is won!"

With a shout, his men prepared to obey his command.

"Now is your chance!" whispered the brigand leader to Noddy. "Away with Bob!"

Noddy headed the machine, containing the bound captive, off to one side.

"There he goes!" Jerry shouted, catching sight of the movement. "We must take after him, Ned. Noddy has Bob with him."

CHAPTER XXX.

HOMEWARD BOUND.

STEERING to one side, to avoid running into the mass of men, soldiers and kidnappers that seemed to be mixed up in inextricable confusion, Jerry sent his machine after Noddy's, which was speeding away.

"Shall I try a shot at the tires?" asked Ned, fingering his revolver.

"No; you might hit Bob," replied Jerry. "I'll catch him."

The battle was now divided. On one side the soldiers and the Mexicans were fighting. On the other was the race between the two autos; a contest of machinery.

At first it seemed that Noddy would escape. But Jerry, throwing in the high-speed clutch, cut down the distance between his car and Noddy's. A few minutes after the chase started it became evident that Jerry would win.

Vasco, seeing how matters were likely to go, had jumped into the car as Noddy started off. All this while poor Bob was bound, and the cloak was

still about his head, so he could not tell what was going on. But he guessed it was some attempt to rescue him.

Nearer and nearer came Jerry's auto. The front wheels overlapped the rear ones of Noddy's machine.

"Stop, or I'll fire!" cried the professor, suddenly, leveling a revolver at Noddy's crowd. They paid no heed to him.

With a quick motion, Vasco leaned over the edge of the seat and fired three times in rapid succession at the tires of Jerry's machine. He missed his aim, but Jerry saw the danger that threatened him. He increased his speed.

In another minute he had come up alongside of Noddy's auto.

"Get ready to grab Bob!" Jerry yelled to Ned and the professor. "Then hold on tight!"

"I'll pay you for this!" exclaimed Vasco, fiercely. He leaned over the edge of the car and made a vicious lunge at Jerry with a long knife. Jerry swerved his machine the least bit and avoided the blow.

The next instant the autos came together with a crash. The shock threw Vasco out, for he was already leaning more than half way over the side door, in an endeavor to strike at Jerry. The wheels of the heavy machine passed over his legs, making him a cripple for life.

Seeing how matters were likely to turn out, Noddy shut off the power and brought his machine to a stop. Ned and the professor took advantage of this to reach over and grab Bob.

"Now we haf rescue him!" exclaimed Maximina. "I knew we would haf found Bob!" and she laughed and cried by turns.

It did not take long to loosen the captive's bonds. The suffocating shawl was taken from his head. Poor Bob was faint and white.

"We'll soon fix him up!" cried the professor, cheerily. "Run to one side, Jerry."

Leaving the discomfited Noddy and his chum, Jack Pender, Jerry steered off under a clump of trees, where, by the administrations of the professor, Bob was soon himself again.

Meanwhile, the battle between the brigands and the troops was waging furiously. Several had fallen on both sides, but the better-trained soldiers knew more about warfare, and slowly but surely they pressed their enemies back.

Then, when Vasco fell and was crushed by the auto, the men lost heart. They faltered, wavered and then turned and fled.

Dalsett endeavored to rally them. He caught hold of some of the brigands and urged them to stand against the charge of the soldiers. One of the kidnappers resented Dalsett's interference. With a wild cry he plunged a knife

into the former miner, and Dalsett fell, seriously wounded.

"They fly! They fly! Take after them!" cried the captain of the troopers. "At them, my brave men! Hew them down! Wipe them off the face of the earth!"

It was noticeable that as the tide turned in favor of the soldiers their leader became more bold. He rode hither and thither, waving his sword, but taking care not to get too far to the front.

At length, with a last volley, the brigands fled. The troopers took after them, killing several and wounding some. They chased them until the kidnappers came to the foothills, and, as this was a wild country, the troopers did not care to follow. So some of the brigands escaped. But the band was broken up and for many years thereafter no trouble was experienced with them.

Noddy had not started up his machine after Vasco had been knocked from it. The former bully seemed to be in a sort of daze, and he and Pender sat staring at the exciting scenes going on all about them.

When Bob had been made comfortable on a bed of blankets spread under the trees, Jerry thought of their former enemy.

"What had we better do about Noddy?" he asked of the professor. "There he sits in his machine. Shall we turn him over to the soldiers?"

"I don't know but what it would be a good idea," said the naturalist. "Just have an eye to him for a few minutes, anyhow. The captain will be here in a little while, and he'll decide what to do. I suppose the law must take its course."

Seeing that Bob was doing very well under the care of Maximina and the professor, Ned and Jerry ran their machine over to where Noddy was.

"Don't give me up!" pleaded Nixon. "I didn't mean to do any harm. It was all Dalsett and Vasco. See, here is your money-belt, Jerry. I never touched a cent of it."

"So it was you who took it, eh?" spoke Ned.

"No—no—I didn't steal it. Dalsett made me take it that night," faltered Noddy. "But I never took any money out of it. I used my own. Please let me go!"

"You are a prisoner of the captain, not one of ours," replied Jerry. "He'll have to settle your case."

At that instant the captain, who, with his men, had ridden to where Vasco was stretched out on the ground, called to Jerry and Ned. They turned the machine toward him.

The professor, too, came running over. The captain spoke some command to one of his men, who began a search of the clothing of the kidnapper leader.

"Ha! There is something!" exclaimed the cap-

tain, as his man hauled two money-belts out of Vasco's pocket. "I wonder whom they belong to?"

"One's mine!" cried Ned.

"And the other is Bob's," said Jerry. "I wonder if there is any money left in them?"

"Look," said the captain, passing them over. The boys and the professor, who had translated the captain's remarks as he had made them, looked over the articles. They found that about half the sum in each belt had been spent.

"Well, half a loaf is better than no bread," remarked Jerry. "We ought to be thankful we're alive, to say nothing of getting part of our cash back."

"You all seem to have plenty of money; you are not like the poor Mexicans," said the captain, with a sigh, looking at the professor, meaningly.

"That reminds me: I promised to reward you and your men if we were successful," spoke the naturalist.

He distributed a good-sized sum among the soldiers, who seemed very pleased to get it. Their salaries under the government were small, and not always paid regularly, so that any addition was welcome.

"What's that?" asked the captain, suddenly, as he shoved his share of the distribution in his pocket.

"It's Noddy and Pender in their auto," said Jerry. "They are going to escape."

"Shall we fire at them?" asked the captain, eagerly.

"What's the use?" asked Jerry. "Let them go. We would only have more bother if we tried to get them punished by law for their crimes. We have Bob back, we discovered the underground city, and what more do we want?"

"Nothing, excepting to get back home," put in Ned. "I'll be glad to see Cresville again."

So no attempt was made to capture Noddy and his chum, and they sped off across-country in their machine, running at top speed, as if they feared pursuit. Bill Berry, slightly wounded, went with them.

"Is there anything more we can do for you?" asked the captain. "If there is not we will start back to the garrison, as it is growing late."

The professor said he thought they could dispense with the services of the troops. So, amid a chorus of good-byes, the horsemen rode away.

"Well, here we are, all together once more," observed the professor.

"And with an addition to our party," put in Ned, pointing to Maximina.

"That's so; we must get her back home next," the professor said.

"First, give me something to eat and drink," begged Bob. "I'm almost starved."

It was so near night that the travelers decided to make a camp. Supper was soon ready, and after it had been disposed of, the boys made a small tent out of blankets for Maximina.

The next morning they started northward. Maximina had told them she had relatives in the City of Mexico, and they headed for that place. They reached it, without having any accidents, a week later, and left the girl who had befriended Bob with her friends.

"I wonder if we'll have any more adventures?" said Ned, as, after a few days' rest, they started from the City of Mexico toward home.

"Hard to say, but probably you boys will," said the professor. "Boys are always having adventures. As for me, I am satisfied with those we had on this trip. We had the most excellent success. My name will be famous when the story of the underground city is told in four large volumes which I intend to issue."

"I would think it might," commented Ned. "Four books are enough to make any one famous."

"Well, it will take some long letters to tell our folks of all that has happened to us," put in Bob. Telegrams had already been sent, so that nobody at home might worry further.

"I'll be glad enough to get back to the States," said Jerry. "Mexico is not the best place in the world."

"I suppose we'll have more adventures before long," was Ned's comment, and he was right. What those adventures were will be told in the next volume of this series, to be called "The Motor Boys Across the Plains; or, The Hermit of Lost Lake." Here we shall meet all of our young friends again, and also some of their enemies, and learn much concerning a most peculiar mystery.

The weather remained fine, and as the auto had been thoroughly repaired in the City of Mexico before leaving, rapid progress was made in the journey northward. They kept, as far as possible, to the best and most frequented roads, having no desire to meet any more brigands.

"Tell you what," said Bob, one day, "automobiling is great, isn't it?"

"Immense!" answered Ned.

"It's the best sport going," added Jerry. "I love this touring car of ours as I would love a brother."

And then he put on a burst of speed that soon took them around a bend of the road and out of sight—and also out of my story.

THE END.

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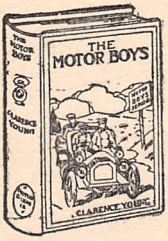

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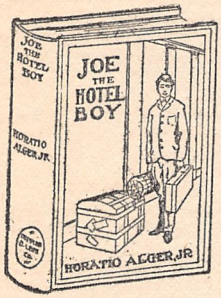

THIS is one of the last stories penned by that prince of all juvenile writers, Horatio Alger, Jr., and is one of his best. It describes the adventures of a youth brought up in the country by an old hermit. When the hermit dies the boy obtains work at a nearby hotel, and later on drifts to the city and obtains a position in another hotel. There is a mystery concerning the lad's identity and likewise the disappearance of a certain blue box, but in the end all terminates satisfactorily.

BEN LOGAN'S TRIUMPH

Or, The Boys of Boxwood Academy

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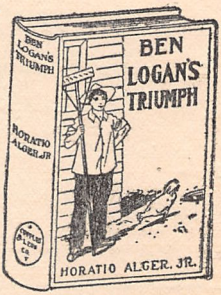
THIS story was penned by Mr. Alger some years before his death, but has never appeared in book form. Ben was a city newsboy, rather rough, but with a heart of gold. He did a great service for a good-hearted farmer, and the latter took Ben home with him. The lad had never been in the country before, and his eyes were opened to a new world. Then the youth was sent to a boarding school, where he made his way to the front amid many difficulties. Mr. Alger's charm as a juvenile writer is so well known it is needless to mention it here, and this story is in his best vein.



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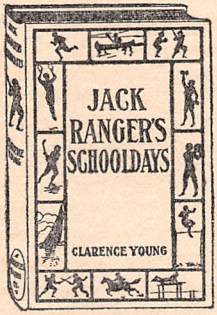

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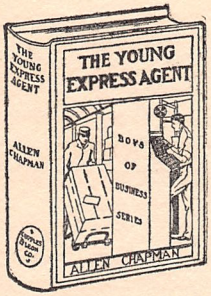

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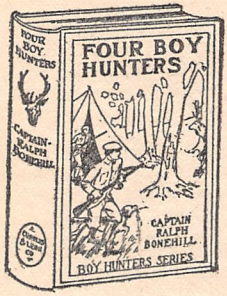

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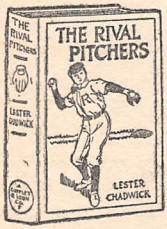

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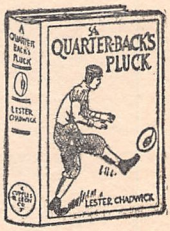

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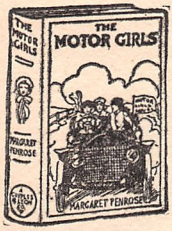

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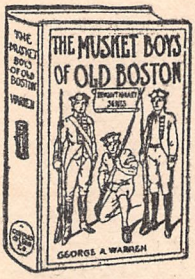

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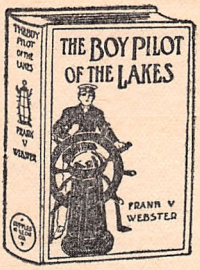

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